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Author's Note

It's (finally?) here! The second book of Clouded Skies. Uploads will probably be unscheduled and may take some time. I've started writing this book when I'm in a Warriors cat mode, but recently I've been in a little more of a dragon and/or wolf-mood. Though I still love this series, and I really want to continue on to the far future, with a scene I've already created very vividly that will take place when Ravenpaw has his full medicine cat name.

Hopefully, I actually get there!

EDIT: I'm currently near the end of the fourth book of this series, but I decided to rewrite the story and will no longer update for this storyline, but I will keep the books up to be read

Allegiances

EchoClan

Normal body shape: long sturdy legs, long tails, large flat paws, curled claws, hard pads, short body length, broad haunches, large chest

Leader:

Acornstar- brown-orange she-cat with amber-brown eyes

Deputy:

Eagleclaw- light brown she-cat with lighter belly, chest, paws, and muzzle, has pale green eyes

Medicine Cat:

Mossrain- small gray tom with hazel eyes, has a white patch over one ear and eye, apprentice Ravenpaw

Ravenpaw- lithe black tom with large owl-like yellow eyes with a lean face and muzzle, mentor Mossrain

Warriors:

Maskdapple- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with a black patch over her eyes and muzzle, apprentice Blossompaw

Oakcloud- handsome brown tabby tom with brown eyes, apprentice Brightpaw

Boulderclaw- large thick-furred gray tom with white lower half, tail tip, chest, throat, and muzzle, has brilliant shining green eyes, apprentice Firepaw

Grayblaze- large gray tom with yellow eyes

Silverstrike- silver tom with white lower half, chest, throat, and

muzzle, has blue eyes, apprentice Flamepaw

Frostfall- thick-furred white she-cat with blue eyes, deaf in one ear, apprentice Featherpaw

Snowfern- small lithe white she-cat with black face, tail, legs, and ears, has icy blue-green eyes

Foxpounce- ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes, apprentice Jaypaw

Russetdawn- ginger-brown she-cat with amber eyes

Stonecoat- large gray tom with green eyes

Shadefur- large gray tom with green eyes

Pebblepeak- gray tabby with white front paws, has yellow eyes, apprentice Willowpaw

Thorntail- brown tabby with brown eyes

Apprentices:

Brightpaw- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with blue-green eyes, mentor Oakcloud

Petalpaw- tortoiseshell-and-white tom with green eyes, mentor Eagleclaw

Flamepaw- fiery tabby tom with dark amber eyes, mentor Silverstrike

Featherpaw- dark fiery tabby she-cat with bright amber eyes, mentor Frostfall

Firepaw- dark fiery red-brown tom with yellow eyes, mentor Boulderclaw

Blossompaw- thick-furred white she-cat with silver back and top of head, has light green eyes, mentor Maskdapple

Willowpaw- lithe white she-cat with black legs, ears, face, and tail, has large ice-blue eyes, mentor Pebblepeak

Jaypaw- thick-furred white tom with pale gray lower legs, ears, face, and tail, has pale green eyes, mentor Foxpouce

Queens:

Goldenpool- large dark golden tabby she-cat with golden eyes, Dustkit, Heatherkit, Stormkit

Kits:

Dustkit- dusty brown tom with light golden-brown eyes

Heatherkit- brown-golden tabby she-kit with brown eyes

Stormkit- small solid brown tabby she-kit with golden eyes

Elders:

Dappletail- dull tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with dull gray-green eyes

BatClan

Normal body shape: large chests, broad shoulders, short legs, thick paws, webbed toes, sleek short fur, small ears, large eyes

Leader:

Dawnstar- pretty tan tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes

Deputy:

Clovertail- light brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Medicine Cat:

Sandflight- tan she-cat with hazel eyes

Warriors:

Brackenfoot- almost-black brown tom with dark brown eyes

Brownear- brown tom with brown eyes, missing one complete ear

Rohan- dark brown tabby tom with brown eyes and a white chest and front paws

Aspenheart- gray she-cat with bright amber eyes

Hickory- black tom with yellow eyes

Leafpelt- black she-cat with bushy fur and green eyes, apprentice Carppaw

Wish- ginger she-cat with yellow eyes, pale orange paws, belly, chest, and muzzle

Bloomcloud- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes

Juniperfur- tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes,

Duskfang – White tom with green eyes, apprentice Frondpaw

Heronclaw- white tom with yellow eyes, apprentice Blazepaw

Hazelfur – Light brown she-cat with yellow eyes, temporary apprentice Ratpaw

Birchsplash- white tom with large black blotches and yellow eyes

Apprentices:

Ratpaw- solid brown tom with bright amber eyes and a long, thin tail, mentor Hazelfur

Blazepaw- brown tom with brown eyes, mentor Heronclaw

Carppaw- brown tom with green eyes, mentor Leafpelt

Frondpaw- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes, mentor Duskfang

Queens:

Emberheart- light ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Ashbreeze- speckled gray she-cat with white lower half, has blue

eyes, mother of Bluekit, Bramblekit, and Breamkit, mate Brackenfoot

Rain- silver tabby she-cat with white paws, chest, belly, and muzzle, has blue eyes

Kits:

Bluekit- blue-gray she-kit with white lower half and blue eyes

Breamkit- light brown tomkit with brown eyes

Fern- small gray she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Meadow- gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Primrose- solid brown she-cat with bright amber eyes

Elders:

Lakeshine- small silver tabby she-cat with light graying blue eyes and white belly, paws, chest, muzzle, and tail tip

SageClan

Normal body shape: short, dense fur, large ears, long thin legs, small paws, lithe body, thin flanks, small chest

Leader:

Robinstar- small tom with cream-colored fur, white lower half and yellow eyes

Deputy:

Dewnose- black she-cat with brown eyes

Medicine Cat:

Poppysong- tan-brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Cindershade- blue-gray she-cat with green eyes

Brookfern- thick-furred brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Briarcloud- thick-furred light brown she-cat with lighter front paws and yellow eyes

Haretail- stubby-legged brown she-cat with stubby tail and lighter paws and muzzle, has brown eyes

Cloudleap- white she-cat with amber eyes

Gorsedust- gray tabby tom with brown eyes

Amberbreeze- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with yellow eyes, apprentice Sparrowpaw

Sorrelfoot- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes

Flutteringfire- mostly-white tortoiseshell with green eyes

Pouncefoot- dark ginger tom with dark amber eyes

Swiftrunner- white tom with large black patches and yellow eyes

Squirrelleap- red-brown she-cat with green eyes

Pikefrost – Ginger tabby tom with blue eyes

Bumbleflight - Black tom with one white paw and hazel eyes

Ivypelt - Cream she-cat with a white muzzle and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Sparrowpaw – White tom with yellow eyes, mentor Amberbreeze

Lightningpaw - thick-furred golden tabby tom with green eyes

Lilypaw - Light gray she-cat with darker grey patches and blue eyes

Queens:

Shadowmist - Black she-cat with pale yellow eyes, mother of Barkkit and Icekit

Hailsong – White tabby she-cat with light gray spots and hazel eyes

Kits:

Barkkit - Black tom with dark gray underbelly and paws, has yellow eyes

Icekit - White she-cat with small light brown patches and amber eyes

Elders:

Weaselclaw- short-legged gray tom with clouding green eyes

Hollypatch- fading tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes

CrowClan

Normal body shape: small bodies, short necks, short legs, dense thick fur, large claws, large teeth

Leader:

Whitestar- white she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy:

Roseclaw- russet she-cat with amber eyes, apprentice Sunpaw

Medici**ne Ca**t:

Hawkstream- ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Sedgeflower- tawny she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Heatherpool- ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Larkfur- gray tabby tom with green eyes

Alderfern- brown tom with brown eyes

Rushfur- light brown tom with light brown eyes

Reedtail- long-tailed brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Pinefeather – Dark brown tom with darker brown stripes and yellow eyes

Thrushflight – Dark brown tabby tom with blue eyes.

Nightspark – Black tom with a white muzzle, chest, and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Sunpaw- golden-brown tabby tom with golden eyes, mentor Roseclaw

Leopardpaw- pretty tan she-cat with darker blotches, has yellow eyes

Queens:

Cedarbreeze- ginger she-cat with amber eyes, kits are Oakkit and Daisykit, mate is Nightspark

Fawnriver- light brown she-cat with long thick tail and white lower legs, muzzle, inside ears, tail tip, belly, and muzzle, hazel eyes, kits are Mistkit, Otterkit, Twigkit

Kits:

Oakkit- ginger tom with amber eyes

Daisykit- black she-cat with white chest and amber eyes

Mistkit- gray she-kit with white paws, has yellow eyes

Otterkit- light brown tabby she-kit with hazel eyes

Twigkit- light brown she-kit with green eyes

Elders:

Splashtail- gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Prologue

Heavy rain poured down onto a quiet forest, coating the ground with mud and hiding the soft footsteps of tiny creatures searching for food in the dark forest. A small, skinny young ginger she-cat was stalking through the woods, her eyes narrowed and ears back to protect herself from the rising wind pressure.

A tiny mouse was clamped in her jaws, so small she could swallow it in one quick bite, but she wouldn't dare. She didn't need this mouse, her young kits did. Almost all of her food went to her kits, so in the quarter moon since they had stopped feeding she had only eaten a mouse tail from the last mouse she brought in.

This made her skinnier than even most BatClan cats, with her pawsteps uneven from her weak body barely able to stay standing. But she continued to push through the wind, heading for a small cave she had hid in just a moon ago before her kits came. Her mate had gone off before the kits were born and never returned.

He'll come back, *she told herself countless times, but her hope was beginning to dwindle.*

Her thoughts were cut off when she heard a faint growl beside her. She tried to sniff, but the rushing rain covered her weak sense of smell. She turned her head to see a pale tabby tomcat approaching her with bristling fur. "Give me your mouse before I take it," he growled in a husky meow over the rain.

"Please, I need it for my kits," she murmured through the small cooling body. She wanted to flee, but she knew she had no chance to outrun him —her only hope was to reveal her kits and plead him to allow her to keep her cheap kill.

His hard eyes didn't flicker. "Did you hear me? I said, give me your mouse!" He gave a fake lunge forward, but it was enough for the poor young mother. She dropped the mouse into the wet and fled, her legs

burning in pain and her body thrown around from her uneven gait.

She finally stopped, her chest burning and heaving with effort when she reached the entrance to her cave. She stumbled inside and into the back, where her two young kits were curled in a makeshift nest made from old moss and weak twigs. A light ginger head rose from the nest, and the she-cat found herself staring into the yellow eyes of her daughter, Maple. Curled up next to her, Tumble slept on, tiny sides moving slowly and weakly.

"Violet?" Maple asked softly, her eyes blurry in the dim light. "Mother, is that you?"

Violet forced a soft purr. "It's me, darling," she meowed, trying to ignore how the wind picked up, ruffling her fur and sending chills down her spine. Tumble mewled in his sleep and threw his small ginger paws around. His mother instantly went forward, curling up around her kits to keep them free of the cold, despite her soaking wet fur.

Suddenly, a faint scent filled her nose, steadily getting stronger. Even with her dying sense of smell, she knew what it was: a fox was approaching her den, following the scent of a warm-blooded creature—Violet herself.

"I'm cold," Maple murmured, her mew husky and dry.

"It's okay, darling." Violet gently licked her daughter's ears. "Just close your eyes, everything will be alright." She heard the fox's claws scrape against the ground of her cave.

Violet closed her eyes, curling herself over her kits protectively and lovingly. She could feel the fox's breath on her back. "Everything will be okay, just sleep, little one. It will be all right. Everything will be all right..."

There was a sudden flare in Violet's neck, and everything went black, with her last thoughts of her beautiful, wonderful kits.

I know, short Prologue, and pretty sad, I think.

Question #1: Why do you think this certain story was chosen as the Prologue?

Question #2: What do you think this will do with the plot?

Question #3: Did you read the first book, and are you excited for this one?

Chapter One

"Blossompaw, under StarClan I now name you Blossomclaw! Use your amazing skills to protect your Clan!"

"Unfair!" Jaypaw strutted forward. "*I* want to be called Jayclaw!"

Willowstar shook her head fiercely. "No, no, no! You're Jaytree!"

"Jaytree doesn't make any sense!" the white and gray tom argued, flicking his fluffy tail.

"Nor does pretending to be warriors and leader when you're only seven moons old," Oakcloud meowed, walking up on calm, large flat paws. His brown tabby coat shone handsomely in the sunlight.

"It's just a game, don't get your tail in a twist!" Blossompaw scoffed, flicking her ear in irritation.

Oakcloud's tail flicked impatiently. "Don't forget you're already in trouble for talking back to Maskdapple," he said to the white and silver she-cat, then added, "shouldn't you be taking care of Dappletail now?"

"You're not my mentor, you can't tell me what to do!" Blossompaw shot back hotly. "Besides, Brightpaw is already in there." She turned her back on him proudly, with her muzzle high in the air.

"Well, since I'm about to take Brightpaw hunting while don't you go take her place? I'm sure Dappletail wouldn't mind the company."

Blossompaw's head shot back to look at the tom. She opened her muzzle to argue, but after a moment she decided better of it and stalked across the clearing. Oakcloud turned to look at the two other apprentices. "Why don't you two go find your mentors?" He still sounded upset from his argument with the strong-headed Blossompaw, but it was clear he wasn't angry with them.

Willowpaw nodded and jumped down from the Rock Pile and padded across the clearing to Pebblepeak, but Jaypaw stayed in front of the brown tabby warrior. "Foxpounce went out to watch the Twolegs, he told me to stay here or join a patrol. Can I come with you and Brightpaw?" He seemed genuinely truthful.

Ravenpaw shivered with the memory of a half moon ago when he had gone to the Moonstream in order to remove the ability to see the future. In the end, he hadn't, and instead, he learned of a danger coming to hunt his Clan. When he returned home he found out a large number of Twolegs had ventured into his territory, and in the half moon they had been here they had searched the forest, scaring the prey and threatening hungry leaf-bare moons.

It hadn't taken too long for the Twolegs to find the dead one, but even though the Twolegs had removed their dead friend, they stayed behind still. Soon, hopefully, they would leave and allow the Clan to have peaceful moons.

Ravenpaw dreaded the day he knew would come eventually--the day the Twolegs would injure one of his Clanmates and he'd have to help heal them. The Clan hadn't had any serious injuries since Ravenpaw became an apprentice, except for the fight between his mother Snowfern and his father's brother, Grayblaze earlier in his apprenticeship.

"Alright, Jaypaw, you can come." Ravenpaw distracted himself from his thoughts as he watched his brother follow Oakcloud for the elders' den to grab the warrior's apprentice, Brightpaw. Having nothing to watch, Ravenpaw stood up and stretched out his young muscles, then he pattered into his den right behind him. The smells that filled his scent glands made him rested--it was all the herbs he had learned.

Some were still hard to remember, but he knew he was getting better at remembering which did which. But he still hadn't had much paw-on-paw training. Besides thorns in pads, light scratches from sharp things in the forest, and some battle practice going too far, he hadn't done much healing. Which he was glad for, of course, that his Clan was healthy and strong, but he also wanted to learn more.

"Ravenpaw, welcome back! Did you have a good time with your littermates?" Mossrain was, as always, messing with the herbs in the storage, taking them out only to put them back in. He was constantly checking them, always wanting to make sure they were perfect and fine. Ravenpaw remembered waking up in the night a few days ago when Mossrain had been making too much noise while checking the store.

"Blossompaw got in trouble again." He couldn't help the sad note in his mew. His heart begged for the chance to talk to his sister and get her to come back to being his littermate, but she acted like he was from a different Clan--like he was a fox, even. She never talked to him, and would only do so if he had begged her to pay attention to him. Even then, she was rude and uncaring. His heart felt heavy with regret at not ever trying harder.

"Don't blame yourself, Ravenpaw, you can't change how she acts." Mossrain flicked his tail dismissively. "A cat comes in with a deep, infected wound. What's your first action?"

"Cleaning the wound of blood," Ravenpaw answered immediately. Mossrain nodded and twitched an ear.

"Next?"

"Make a poultice of marigold and goldenrod?" Ravenpaw felt he was missing a step and let the words hang in the form of a question.

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Mossrain asked without looking over.

"Uh... Telling..." The apprentice scratched his claws over the ground.

Mossrain nodded confirmation that he had been correct about making the poultice. Feeling more confident, he continued. "Clean your pad and claws in the water then put the poultice on the wound. Make sure it's on right and evenly, then cover it with cobwebs."

Mossrain dipped his head dramatically in his direction. "I have

trained you well, young apprentice!"

Ravenpaw purred in amusement, then asked, "what herbs are we low on?"

"We're completely out of borage leaves and yarrow," Mossrain sighed in reply, pawing at a few dead brightly-colored leaves. "And we're low on broom, burnet, celandine, comfrey roots, dock, dandelions, feverfew, coltsfoot, horsetail, honey, juniper berries, lavender, mallow, parsley, ragwort, raspberry, sorrel, thyme, tormentil, and watermint."

Ravenpaw shook his head in confusion, trying to get a grasp on all the names. He barely remembered half of them. "Uh, what can I get?"

Mossrain purred then meowed, "I forgot you're still learning! Comfrey and coltsfoot are always needed, and we could use more horsetail and juniper berries soon. Why don't you take somebody out with you and gather them? You should find coltsfoot by the stream in the forest near BatClan and SageClan's border, and comfrey shouldn't be far from that. Continue on the edge of the Thunderpath and you'll find horsetail. Head straight back towards the camp and when you find a fallen log-whoever you bring will help you find it-juniper berries aren't far. Then you can come on home. Just take a few stems of each, but for comfrey dig down and get a few roots, leave the flowers."

Ravenpaw nodded, running through the orders as he left the den on soft paws. He looked around the clearing but didn't see any of the cats he knew. He headed for the apprentices' den, but after a moment he turned to stop at the nursery. The smell of milk flooded his senses as he got closer, and warmth flooded around him as he slipped into the den. Looking around, his eyes softened as he looked at Goldenpool's nest.

Heatherkit was sleeping soundly, while Dustkit and Stormkit tussled clumsily together at the edge of the nest. Stormkit's big golden eyes swerved to Ravenpaw's, and they lit up with excitement. "Ravenpaw!" she mewled, jumping away from her brother and stumbling over to him on her small, stubby legs.

"Hey, Stormkit!" He purred happily and touched his nose to her muzzle, being careful to not touch her nose. Dustkit struggled to his small paws and hurried over. "How are you, Dustkit?" Ravenpaw asked the small tom.

"I beat Stormkit!" he said instantly, tail sticking out straight. His kit fluff was thick and messy, giving him a tiny, innocent look.

"Nu-uh!" Stormkit denied it quickly, shaking her head back and forth. "Not true! I beat him!" Stormkit looked brightly at Ravenpaw, begging him to believe her like it was an awful lie that would get her in trouble.

"It doesn't matter who won," Ravenpaw meowed, crouching down and looking at them both. "It was all fun and games, right?"

"I guess," Stormkit muttered, scratching her claws over the ground.

Ravenpaw looked at Dustkit expectantly, and the kit nodded with a sigh of complaint. He said under his breath, "I *did* beat her, you know."

Stormkit hissed in excitement and jumped at him.

Snorting in amusement, Ravenpaw left the kits and went over to Goldenpool, sniffing Heatherkit's side. "She's fine, Ravenpaw," Goldenpool meowed. The apprentice looked up, seemingly guilty. Heatherkit wasn't as active as her littermates, and it always worried him. It didn't seem to bother Goldenpool, though, so he knew it wasn't bad. But his anxiety still told him to constantly check on her. "Go on, I'm sure Mossrain has sent you on some type of mission."

"Comfrey, coltsfoot, horsetail, juniper," he named them off.

"And what are their uses?" Even though she wasn't his real mentor, Goldenpool still often helped him with his training.

"Comfrey soothes wounds, coltsfoot helps shortness of breath, horsetail is for infected wounds, and juniper helps bellyaches." He tried to sound confident, but his voice broke a few times when he was uncertain.

"There is a second use to comfrey and juniper. Can you remember them?" Goldenpool's head tilted slightly, eyes shining with curiosity.

Ravenpaw raked his brain. Comfrey's other use slipped from his mind, but coltsfoot helped him remember the other use of juniper. "Juniper berries can also help with shortness of breath," he answered.

"Correct." Goldenpool nodded her head. Guessing he couldn't remember anything more about comfrey, she meowed after a moment, "comfrey can also help mend bones."

Ravenpaw sighed as the memory came back to him. "Right. I remember now." Goldenpool purred and threw her head towards the den entrance.

"Better get going," she meowed, and he touched her ear with his muzzle before hurrying out. He bounded into the apprentices' den, slipping down the tunnel and into the small area open to the sky. Instantly, he found Featherpaw and Petalpaw talking happily, while Flamepaw lay nearby with a flicking tail tip.

Avoiding the grouchy red tabby, Ravenpaw went over to Featherpaw. "Featherpaw, are you doing anything?" he asked.

She shook her head, then asked, "what do you need?"

"Mossrain's sent me out to get some herbs and told me to bring someone with. I was wondering if you'd help me out?" he asked nervously, hoping he wasn't bothering the kind and helpful young apprentice.

"Of course!" She jumped to her paws and looked at Petalpaw. "Do you want to come?" she asked the tortoiseshell.

"Sure." The tom shrugged and got to his paws, shaking out his coat. Ravenpaw felt guilty about ruining the tom's rest, but he did notice an excited gleam in his eyes as he looked at Featherpaw.

"Alright, come on!" Featherpaw bounced from the small den and disappeared into the sleeping area then into the clearing in just a

few heartbeats. Ravenpaw scrambled after her, and Petalpaw followed him out. "Where are we headed?" Featherpaw asked without even looking at him-instead, she surveyed the clearing, almost like she was looking for enemies.

"SageClan border, near the small stream next to the Old Thunderpath," Ravenpaw answered. "We'll get coltsfoot, then we need to look around for comfrey in the same area. We'll head down the Thunderpath until we find horsetail, then at a straight direction back to camp we'll find a fallen log and juniper should be growing around there."

"Oh, I know what juniper looks like!" Featherpaw meowed quickly, waving her tail.

"Mossrain once used comfrey for some scratches a crow gave me," Petalpaw meowed, then shoved a ear forward to show off the small nick in the flesh. Ravenpaw guessed there had been more wounds around the ear that had since healed. "I still caught it!" he added.

"Yeah, yeah!" Featherpaw shoved his shoulder with her's then padded off. "You two coming?" She flicked her tail playfully and suddenly raced off.

"No far! You got a head start!" Petalpaw bounded after her, and for a moment, Ravenpaw was worried they had forgotten he was even going with them, but then Petalpaw skidded to a stop and looked back at him, confusion and excitement shining in his gaze. "Come on, before we lose her!"

Ravenpaw felt a flash of happiness, and hurried after the older tom. Together, they raced down from the camp and attached themselves to the forest floor, following the fresh scent of Featherpaw. The young medicine cat apprentice felt flares alight in his stomach as he ran with Petalpaw. He expected this journey to be awkward and quiet, but now he was like any other apprentice, something he hadn't thought he would have since he had decided to try to become a healer.

"Come on, I see her tail!" Petalpaw's steps began to get faster and he pulled ahead, his paws surprisingly light from his bulky frame.

Ravenpaw quickened his pace, ignoring his flaring muscles and concentrating on following Petalpaw's trail, not wanting to get tangled in any vines or to trip over any roots. That would be overly embarrassing.

Ravenpaw was so focused on watching the ground in front of him that he didn't hear Petalpaw's call of warning as he skidded to the stop, and the young apprentice rammed into the tortoiseshell's haunches with a thump. They rolled over and got tangled up, but soon enough Petalpaw was on his paws and shaking out his fur.

Ravenpaw was scared he would be angry, but then he caught the other apprentice's eyes and saw them glowing with amusement, with no bad feelings showing. "You're as clumsy as your brother!" he laughed, licking a paw and drawing it over his ear.

"You were the one who stopped!" Ravenpaw shot back playfully, feeling glee rise in his chest, feeling like it was going to burst.

Petalpaw flicked his tail to dismiss the subject, and Ravenpaw suddenly noticed the tom's tight muscles, the way his ears were perked. Ravenpaw tasted the air, and found Featherpaw's scent was thick in the air. Petalpaw twitched his tail, and Ravenpaw followed the movement to see skid marks on the ground where Featherpaw had pulled to a stop.

Is she trying to ambush us? he thought, beginning to flick his head around to search for Featherpaw's fiery-red pelt, but Petalpaw stopped his movement when he flicked his ear as a sign to stay still. Not before Ravenpaw caught a flash of red fur.

Then, she she-cat launched herself from the bushes. Ravenpaw was surprised she didn't let out a yowl, something his littermates had always done as kits. Then he realized she wanted the element of surprise, and because yowling victory would give away her position, she stayed silent. This allowed her to fly through the air without Petalpaw knowing.

But the moment the hairs on her front paws brushed against Petalpaw's back fur, he dropped to the ground. With a *mrrow* of surprise, Featherpaw flew over the tom and landed ahead of him.

She landed on her paws, but was unsteady for a few heartbeats. They proved fatal.

Petalpaw launched forward and tackled her, hissing playfully as they rolled over the ground. For a moment, Ravenpaw was upset they got distracted by their mission, but then he heard a soft trickling of the water, and he avoided the two fighting friends and slipped through some undergrowth.

Past the thick brush, he found the small stream he had been looking for, along with a small patch of coltsfoot flowering up next to the water. He went forward and gently nipped off some stems, pulling away with a few in his jaws and surveying the damage he had done to the plant. They were delicate, getting so close to leaf-bare, but the yellow and white flowers seemed to be unfazed by his intrusion, except for the few broken steps he had taken.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

Ravenpaw jumped in surprise, his teeth digging into the stems, and he felt its juices flood onto his tongue. He spit the herb out in disgust from the taste, hanging his mouth open with a sour look on his face. He quickly took a few laps of water, trying to calm his puffed fur, and it lowered soon enough. Finally, he answered Featherpaw with a nod, even though she had already noticed the coltsfoot and was sniffing it curiously.

"What did you say was next?" she asked brightly, "horsetail?"

"Comfrey, then horsetail," Ravenpaw corrected softly, not liking to tell his friend she was wrong. She didn't seem to care, and shrugged her shoulders.

"I tried," she meowed simply, then asked, "it's around here too, isn't it?"

"If you two didn't flatten it," Ravenpaw said wholeheartedly, though for a moment he was scared the older apprentices would be offended. He felt weak relief when he saw both their eyes shining with amusement.

"Let's hope we didn't," Petalpaw meowed, then asked, "what does comfrey look like? Just to make sure I remember correctly," Petalpaw added, seemingly in a hurry.

"We're looking for a plant with small bright flowers and big leaves." He raked his brain to make sure he was correct, and decided he was from the blurry memory of Mossrain showing him a patch on the far side of the moor a quarter moon before.

"Got it!" Featherpaw hurried off before Petalpaw could, blasting right past him, slipping her tail against his nose so he was distracted by sneezing to hurry after her. Ravenpaw purred with amusement, suddenly feeling much older than the two apprentices from his serious manner, and for a moment he wished he could be as care free, then reminded himself of the important job he had. There were plenty of warriors' apprentices, but only one medicine cat apprentice.

"Hey, is this it?" Petalpaw called from a hidden place nearby behind the trees.

Ravenpaw cleared his head with a quick flick his ear and picked up the coltsfoot, hurrying to the bulky tortoiseshell's voice. He soon caught the ginger and white on the tom's coat, and soon found himself looking at a healthy clump of comfrey. Featherpaw scrambled through some bracken, ignoring the pieces that got caught in her thick coat. "I was here first! I found it!" she called, then noticed Ravenpaw was already here and ducked her head in embarrassment. She muttered a playfully sorry and Petalpaw rolled his eyes.

Ravenpaw set the coltsfoot on a root then dug gently at the bottom of the flowers, until his claw dug into a root. He cleared away the soil with a few flicks of his paw then bit off some roots, pulling them out carefully in case they weren't fully disconnected. He covered the roots back up to hide them from creatures that may hurt them, then he grabbed the coltsfoot and led the way to the horsetail.

The two other apprentices followed him, and he felt weird leading them. He looked at Petalpaw with a flick of his head as an offering

to go ahead of him, and after a moment the older apprentice agreed, letting Ravenpaw have relief. "We're just heading along the Thunderpath, right?" Petalpaw asked him, looking back.

The black apprentice nodded confirmation, and Petalpaw looked back in front of him, stepping out of the way of a root that threatened to take hold. Ravenpaw made sure to follow his pawsteps, while Featherpaw gleefully leaped over the small blockage and continued on excitedly. Ravenpaw wished he could have her enthusiasm, but felt tired just thinking about it.

His legs burned from the run they had at the beginning of their journey, and his muscles cried for a simple rest. But he knew it was better to get all they needed, then he could rest in his den. If Mossrain allowed him. The medicine cat always checked the herbs and wanted them to be in their correct places, and he always wanted high stocks.

"Wait!" Featherpaw let out a shocked gasp and stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong?" Petalpaw's claws slid out and his fur bristled. He looked like a fierce warrior ready for a fight.

"The Gathering's tonight, isn't it?" she asked, eyes wide with excitement.

Petalpaw seemed a little annoyed, and looked up at the sky, despite the moon being hours from showing. "Yeah, and?"

"It's Ravenpaw's first time! The last Gathering was like two days before he got apprenticed!" Her tail waved excitedly.

Ravenpaw gently set the herbs on the ground and asked, "you think I'll be allowed come?" he asked.

Featherpaw scoffed playfully, going over to nudge his shoulder. "Of course! You're a new medicine cat! You'll likely go to every Gathering there is."

Ravenpaw ducked his head, licking his chest in embarrassment. "I don't know about that," he meowed softly but didn't argue any points. Instead, he picked up his herbs, and Featherpaw took it as a

signal to move on. But she still had an excited bounce in her step, and it was clear she was as excited as ever.

Ravenpaw couldn't help being overjoyed at the idea of going to the Gathering, but then anxiety washed over him. Warriors from all four Clans would be there. Would he be able to handle it? Shaking fear from his pelt, he hurried to follow his friends.

The first chapter is done! Yay! I'm excited for this story to continue, and for adding more of the other apprentices into the plot.

Question #1: What do you think about Featherpaw?

Question #2: What do you think about Petalpaw?

Chapter Two

"No, no, no, Wish, you're doing it wrong." Rowanpaw looked over in interest as Brownear padded over to the ginger she-cat, once a rogue and now his Clanmate. "Your balance is way off—you look like a badger trying to hunt."

"Oh, sorry! My paw just really hurts from—" she was cut off the senior warrior.

"No excuses! You're a part of this Clan now, and you need to pull your weight. Now, give me that crouch-and-leap again. Keep steady this time!" The brown tom was shaking his head, annoyed. Rowanpaw knew he didn't like having the new cats in the Clan, which is one reason Dawnstar had told him to help with Wish's training, to get him to accept them more. He couldn't mock Wish's future warrior skills if he had taught them to her.

It wasn't fair for the she-cat, for she had injured her paw a few days before jumping from the camp entrance. She had landed awkwardly on her paw and sprained it. That didn't stop Brownear, though, and Rowanpaw assumed he was trying to push her to get her to leave the Clan. It was rude, but it would turn her into a real warrior.

Realizing he had been distracted, Rowanpaw slipped into the nursery, feeling the tough bushes tug at his fur. Inside, the den was crowded with cats, more crowded than it had been for quite a while. Lakeshine still had her nest in the corner, while Ashbreeze's had been moved farther into the back to make room for both Emberheart and Rain, who were expecting their kits before the next moon past. Both their stomachs were swollen, but still quite small. They were being fed the best though, and the thoughts made Rowanpaw's stomach growl in pain. Near them, Fern, Meadow, and Primrose were curled in their own nest, which was made small and tight to help them stay warm. Originally, it had been bigger, but Aspenheart had decided to sleep in the warriors' den instead since her kits still saw her as the cat who had left their brother and may have left them too. It was unclear if she actually would have before,

but Rowanpaw had seen how quick she had given up when her kits left her side.

Emberheart, Rain, and his three sisters were sleeping, so Rowanpaw moved back to Ashbreeze, and the she-cat looked at him for a moment before moving her body so he could see her kits. Breamkit and Bluekit were both moving softly, mewling as they suckled, which they did constantly in attempts to get more milk, but Bramblekit lay still. He could've been mistaken as dead if it weren't for his sides moving ever so softly.

He looked small, smaller than he should at almost a moon old. He was skinny and weak. Ashbreeze leaned over and nudged him to her stomach with her nose, but he was too weak to even lift his head up. Ashbreeze mewled in grief and pain, knowing there was nothing she could do for the poor kit. She didn't have much milk, and because his siblings were slightly stronger, they took it all before Bramblekit could get anything, even if Ashbreeze tried to hold them back for him to feed alone. It was almost time for them to give up milk anyway, and the queen was hoping he'd survive long enough.

Rowanpaw felt a flash of fear as Bramblekit took a shuddering breath, but then he calmed himself when the small kit still breathed softly. Ashbreeze curled protectively around them, deciding they had enough open air. Rowanpaw nodded and took his leave, sniffing Emberheart for a moment to make sure she was alright on his way out.

Out in the clearing, Brownear was watching Wish practice with a lashing tail, and now Hickory had joined them and was practicing a leap-and-twist move. Rowanpaw decided to join them, knowing he needed the practice. Hazelfur, his new mentor since Emberheart went into the nursery, was assessing Rohan's progress, and Rowanpaw had decided to stay at camp then go with his mentor and face his father, who he been avoiding since they returned from their journey only half a moon before. He had been doing well so far, and even better with not seeing Aspenheart.

The she-cat was always hunting or, more likely, patrolling, staying out of camp to get away from the stares she got by most cats. Most

of them sided with Rowanpaw in the fact that she was a traitor to the code and didn't deserve to return, so she took to leaving the camp to hunt and patrol in the attempt to gain back her Clanmates trust—without even speaking to them. Rowanpaw shook his head in disgust as the thoughts of the retched she-cat came to mind.

"Brownear, do you mind if I join you?" Rowanpaw asked, and the senior warrior looked relieved.

"You can join, and maybe show these two how a real leap is made." His eyes narrowed on the two former rogues for a heartbeat. While Wish looked down, upset by the fact, Hickory looked back at Brownear with a challenging gaze. Rowanpaw felt a flash of respect for the tom for standing up against the older cat, even for doing it silently.

Rowanpaw nodded to the senior warrior and crouched, testing his claws a few times and stretching out his spine. He kept his breathing calm, then he launched himself up and through the air. He landed smoothly right in front of the camp entrance, looking back at the three cats to see he had crossed the entire clearing. Of course, that wasn't too much of a good feat. The clearing was small and most kits at four or five moons old could leap just halfway across.

"Good form, great landing!" Brownear meowed happily, seemingly calmed by Rowanpaw's show of training, though it got tough again when he looked at the former rogues. "All right, you two. Can you do as good as Ratpaw?"

Rowanpaw hid a winch as he was reminded of his real name, and wished it could be changed. But recently, he had realized he might never be able to, at least not without troubles. The warrior code said cats could change their name, but only with the acceptance of an older kin member. Since Rowanpaw before didn't have any parents, he would've been able to change his name with small troubles.

But now Aspenheart was back and was clearly not going to agree to his wishes. As long as she was around, he would never get to change his name. He cursed his mother in his head, hating her to

his very core. He had no pity for the she-cat and wished she would disappear so he could claim his real name. Rohan would have to disappear too, and Rowanpaw was fine with that. All the rogue cats could leave, except for his sisters—Aspenheart didn't deserve them.

Rowanpaw looked over as Hickory leaped through the air, moving smoothly and landing on incredibly soft paws. Rowanpaw was surprised by the move, it looked like it had been done by a warrior training for moons. It had been beautifully performed, but Brownear was shaking his head before Hickory had even landed.

"No, no, no! You'll never learn!" His tail lashed, and Rowanpaw decided the tom was being unfair on purpose. Surprisingly, Hickory turned to the tom with anger in his eyes, but he remained calm, his fur staying down and his tail still.

"I believe it was rather nice, don't you, Ratpaw?" He turned his yellow eyes to the young apprentice, locking gazes.

Rowanpaw felt another flash of respect for the tom for standing up for himself, and he couldn't help but say to Brownear, "it wasn't a bad leap. Better than mine."

Brownear lashed his tail. "Are you a senior warrior?" the brown tom asked, but didn't give time for an answer. "No, you're not! And I say the leap was all off!"

"Oh, lay off!" Leafpelt padded up on soft paws and flicked her tail dismissively over Brownear's muzzle. He jerked his head back and snorted, but, wisely, he stayed silent. Even he, as argumentive as he was, wouldn't argue with Leafpelt. "He did it perfectly. Good job, Hickory." She turned back to her mate, eyes shining with amusement. "Come on, grumpy mouse, let's go hunting." She nudged him for the entrance of the camp. Grumbling in reply, he followed her along.

"Thanks for agreeing with me," Hickory meowed, flicking his ear as his eyes calmed from the confrontation.

"Good job standing up for yourself." Hickory was clearly a confident tom, and it would help him to stand up against unjust warriors.

Hickory nodded in agreement, then went to see his mate without another word. Rowanpaw watched after him, then turned to attention when he saw Dawnstar leaving her makeshift den under a small overhang. She padded across the clearing and jumped onto the pathway of the camp, her mud-stained paws standing out from her tan fur.

"Let all my Clanmates listen to what I need to say," she called calmly, and the voice traveled through the entire clearing. From the edges of the clearing, cats sat and looked over, not needing to move closer to hear clearly, for the clearing was tiny and as the rest of the Clan appeared, it became crowded and hard to slip through the warriors of the Clan. "I have decided who to take to the Gathering tonight," she meowed but was cut off as Brownear stood, hitting Bloomcloud's shoulder, and she snorted and shifted away, pressing against her sister Juniperfur.

"What about the rogues? You said in one moon you would decide if they would join the Clan or not, but shouldn't we decide now before going to the Gathering in case someone lets it slip that we have outsiders in our camp?" he asked.

Rowanpaw could see his point and looked expectantly at his leader. She also seemed to understand his reasoning, and her eyes narrowed in thought.

Brownear decided to push his point further. "The other Clans are sure to find out soon enough, they may already know. If you don't mention the rogues, they'll think you're scared of announcing them. We need to decide before we leave."

Dawnstar nodded and flicked her tail to show him she understood his claim. "What Brownear says is true, we do need to decide now." She looked at her Clanmates, but they seemed to be fine with her speaking. She had clearly hoped they would help her out with the decision. But it was up to her. "The former loners have helped us—" she made sure to avoid the term "rogues" when she spoke "—and have done a lot for our Clan over the last half moon. Some of them are having troubles adjusting to Clan life, but they are still bringing in more prey. With more cats, it is easier to corner prey, and Rohan does have good ideas when it comes to hunting."

Rowanpaw noticed his father and new mentor had returned when the Clan was gathering and felt a flash of hate as he saw Rohan next Aspenheart. He was glad they were all the way across the clearing. But he felt out of place in the middle of Heronclaw and Duskfang, so he quickly slipped past them and sat next to Blazepaw, Frondpaw, and Carppaw, who welcomed him with quiet mews of greeting. The apprentices then focused back on their leader.

"The rogues have given us future warriors," Dawnstar was saying, "and even a future medicine cat," she added, for Fern had already started training with Sandflight and was already a natural. "That is why I will allow the loners to stay, and join our Clan as real members." Most of the warriors murmured agreement, though Brackenfoot looked angered and Brownear rather surprised. He had most likely suspected the loners would be turned away.

"To fully accept them," Dawnstar continued after the noise died down, "is to give them true warrior names. Rohan, bring your cats to the front of the group, including Rain and your kits." She looked at the nursery entrance, where Rain and Emberheart were both sitting. Rowanpaw's old mentor egged Rain onward gently with a friendly nudge—they had both gotten close after their journey and being in the nursery together.

Once Primrose had led her sisters up and Rain settled next to Hickory, Dawnstar continued. "Some of your names do not match with our customs, so I ask now if I may have permission to change your names as I see fit." Rohan looked at his cats, and after each of them nodded—Primrose and her littermates seemed the most excited—he gave a dip of his head for the BatClan leader to continue.

"StarClan," she said, looking up at the sky, "I ask you to look at these former loners. They have chosen to join our ranks, and I believe you accept our wishes. Now, I will reward them true names for them to belong in our ranks, truly and completely. Rohan." She looked at the dark brown tabby for a long moment before finally saying, "I name you Hawktail for your fierce determination to prove yourself and your wise way of words." She leaped down to stand in front of the tom and touched her nose to his forehead. She murmured softly, and he licked her shoulder. She stepped back and

dipped her head to him.

The newly named Hawktail returned it then moved closer to Aspenheart, who obviously wouldn't need a name changing ceremony except to take away the warrior name she didn't deserve. And so, Dawnstar passed over the she-cat and looked at Hickory.

"Hickory, you will now be known as Hickoryclaw. Your quick taking to battle moves will surely help us in the future." She touched his forehead and he licked her shoulder, having seen Hawktail do it as well. Dawnstar drew back, then looked at Rain. "Rain, soon you will birth future warriors of my Clan, and for your future moons as a queen, I name you Rainsong. I hope your kits will honor our Clan as much as I believe you will." After the respectful exchange of the newly named cat licking the leader's shoulder, Dawnstar stood in front of Wish.

She seemed to stand there for an unusual amount of time. While the rest of the cats had proven themselves as strong warriors, Wish was farther behind.

"Wish, you have taken to our rules without complaint, but your skills at battle and hunting could easily be improved. This is why you shall be called Wishpaw, and as soon as your mentor believes you fully trained, you may join your friends as warriors." Surprisingly, the ginger and pale-ginger she-cat dipped her head in respect. She was older than maybe half the other warriors but seemed to accept the fact she wasn't as good as her fellow Clanmates. "You shall be trained by Brownear, but you may sleep in the warriors' den."

"What about us?" Dawnstar looked slightly disapproving as Primrose spoke out of turn, though she turned to the young kit with patience.

"Fern and Meadow," the leader meowed after a moment, "you will now be called Fernkit and Meadowkit until the age of six moons. Primrose, I have chosen to award you the new name—" before the leader could continue, Primrose cut her off.

"Can I keep my name? It already kinda sounds like a warrior one!"

Her tail rose high in the air and her eyes shined excitedly.

"That is why it must be changed," Dawnstar explained, "Primrosekit and Primrosepaw would be a mouthful, don't you think?" Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Why not Primkit?" she asked kindly. "Then when I get my warrior name, I can be Primrose again!" Dawnstar seemed surprised by the answer the kit gave and thought about it for a moment.

After a few heartbeats, she nodded acceptance. "Alright, Primrose, that is fair. I name you Primkit, so you one day may be known as Primrose once again." The kit mewled in excitement but went quiet as Dawnstar went back to the top of her rock. "It is time to choose who will go to the Gathering. I will take Heronclaw, Hazelfur, Bloomcloud, Clovertail, Sandflight, Ratpaw, and Blazepaw."

Rowanpaw felt a flash of excitement as his name was called, and his spine quivered at the thought of entering EchoClan's forest. Blazepaw stiffened beside him and nudged his brother. When Rowanpaw looked over, he saw the same look of happiness he had from his littermate. Then they hurried to join the group getting ready to leave for the Gathering, and both the apprentices moved to their mentors, knowing they were meant to stay next to them on the way there and back.

"Brackenfoot, take care of patrols while we're gone." Dawnstar nodded to the senior warrior, and after he returned it, the she-cat turned and led the way up to the camp entrance. She disappeared as she leaped down, and her warriors quickly followed her. When Rowanpaw made it to the top of the rocks, he leaped down and tried to ignore the suckling mud at his paws. A pang went through his heart as he left his sisters behind at camp but then felt light with the knowledge they now were true Clan members.

He shook his head to clear the thoughts of the camp from his mind —he focused on following his Clanmates through their murky territory. As they went on, quickly making their way to the Gathering area, they passed a fallen, hollow log, and a shiver went up Rowanpaw's spine. As they went past he eyed it for a long moment, and Blazepaw slipped away from Heronclaw and pressed

against his brother, fear and sadness coming off his fur.

It was the log they had sheltered in as kits with Sparkkit, after she was injured from falling from a tree. It was where she had taken her last breath, and where Blazepaw had almost done the same. Rowanpaw remembered their first trip to the Gathering, where his breath had caught in his throat when he saw it. He always avoided this place and the bad memories it gave him. Finally, it was lost from his vision, and he cleared his mind enough to look ahead of him. He caught Hazelfur's eyes and saw the sad gleam in the she-cat's yellow gaze. She understood his pain and gave him a small nod.

Soon enough, they reached the Old Thunderpath, and Dawnstar started up the side of the path. Rowanpaw stepped onto the surface to get out of the mud and continued alongside his Clanmates. Bloomcloud gave him a side look of disapprovement, knowing his dislike of their territory's ground, but she didn't say anything. Rowanpaw tried to take his mind from her and looked at the EchoClan forest across from them, staring into the dehpts of the trees. The shadows seemed endless, but he could also see where patches of light shone through the heavy trees.

Orange and yellow leaves were floating to the ground even as he watched, coating the forest floor in their varities of color. For a moment, Rowanpaw saw a flash of a bird as it dived through the trees, and his stomach growled in starvation, wishing for the sweet taste of prey. He looked to see if his Clanmates had noticed, but they were all used to the sound of a growling stomach and didn't give him a single look.

Slowly, their territory narrowed, the mountains that made a wall on one side of their territory coming closer and closer until he could make out the cracks and moss lining the edge of the mountainside. Only then did Dawnstar lead her Clan onto the Old Thunderpath, though their soft pads were pained by the hard, scratchy surface.

Only Rowanpaw and Hazelfur were completely unaffected, for their pads had been hardened by their journey into the Twolegplace. Dawnstar didn't lead them directly across, but instead at an angle, so when they finally reached the forest the Gathering hollow was

just in front of them. Dawnstar pushed through some thick brambles, looking uncomfortable, though it already had a hollowed area from countless BatClan cats going through to reach the hollow. When Rowanpaw finally followed, slipping from the cold sunlight and underneath the trees, where the air was kept warm, he suddenly felt a wash of strange relief.

He passed through the bracken without too much trouble, feeling it slip over his fur smoothly. Blazepaw followed behind him, and together they hurried after their leader down a small slope, then they looked around the hollow with wonder. It seemed much bigger than their first journey, though Rowanpaw remembered feeling small and helpless under the gaze of the ancient oak tree to one side of the hollow, towering over the other trees like a watchful mother. He knew one reason it seemed bigger is because they were the first Clan there, leaving open spaces where the other Clans would stay.

Dawnstar instantly headed over to sit at the bottom of the trunk with Clovertail and Sandflight, while the rest of the BatClan cats spread out and tried to find the best spots to settle down at to wait. Rowanpaw and Blazepaw went over to the small stream and took a few laps of the water, and feeling the cool water go down his throat reminded him of the water in the Twolegplace garden.

After the warriors had found a spot to lay during the Gathering, they went over to join the apprentices at the river and took their fill. Acornstar, despite her dislike of the other Clans, allowed them to drink at the stream, though any attempt at hunting would be met with claws, truce or no truce. Rowanpaw shivered as he remembered the story from Lakeshine of when Acornstar scared the fur off a CrowClan apprentice when he tried to catch a mouse that ran right under his paws.

The EchoClan leader was a fierce warrior, and his spine tingled at the thought to meet her in battle. As far as he knew, Dawnstar was still planning to attack EchoClan for a share of their territory, most likely the land around the Gathering area, which was a large chunk of their territory, but it would be nessecarry for survival. Perhaps she would only fight for a part of it, though. It would be up to her and her senior warriors to decide.

Rowanpaw was startled when the underbrush on the other side of the Gathering hollow shivered, and a heartbeat later the broad-shouldered Acornstar appeared, her ginger-brown fur glowing, freshly brushed. A light brown she-cat with lighter unders appeared after her, and Rowanpaw remembered her as Eagleclaw from the last Gathering, Acornstar's deputy and daughter.

The leader scanned the clearing with her amber-brown eyes with a dark look, then finally decided to head off to where Dawnstar sat. Eagleclaw followed, as did a small gray tom with a white patch over one ear and eye. Rowanpaw guessed he was the EchoClan medicine cat, and noticed a small shape slipping after the gray tom. He was small, a new apprentice, probably, with jet black fur. Rowanpaw got a glance of large, glowing yellow eyes that reminded him of an owl's.

More cats appeared until their group looked the size of Rowanpaw's entire Clan. A few were apprentices, and they moved together in a group, looking threatening. Three were small like the black tom from before, while another apprentice was a dark fiery-red tom and the last a pretty tortoiseshell that looked almost ready to be a warrior.

Rowanpaw rolled his shoulders to hide his fear, and looked at his brother. "Come on," he said, then led a determined pace towards the other apprentices. Blazepaw mewled in fear but quickly followed his brother. One of the cats noticed him quickly—a small thick-furred white she-cat with silver along her back, her light green eyes glowing in hostility. She let out a soft growl, and the oldest cat looked over.

"Blossompaw, stop," the tortoiseshell scolded, her eyes kind, but the small apprentice let the growl continue in her throat. Rowanpaw saw another tortoiseshell cross the clearing, this time a warrior with a black patch splashed over her eyes, making her face dark and her green eyes stand out brilliantly.

"Blossompaw!" she hissed, and the apprentice looked over coldly. Rowanpaw was surprised by the look, knowing that no warrior would accept that from such a young cat. He was right, for the old warrior's eyes narrowed and she growled, "we don't pick fights with

the other Clans, this is a night of truce!"

"Well that's mouse-brained," the apprenticed spot back hotly, fur puffing, and she looked at Rowanpaw like he had stolen her kill from under her nose. "He's the enemy! In our territory!"

For that, she got a paw smacked over her ear, though her eyes still shined defiantly at the cat Rowanpaw assumed to be her mentor. "On this night, this hollow is StarClan's! You remember what Acornstar told you, don't you?" Her eyes shined with anger as the apprentice shrugged uncaringly. "If you cause one more problem you're going straight back home," she reminded the apprentice coldly.

Blossompaw scoffed. "That was a useless threat! No cat is going to leave the Gathering just to bring me back to camp! Besides, she's calling out my name to announce my apprenticeship, so I have to be here." She looked like she knew she had won the point, but it was clear by the warrior's face that she hadn't.

"Your father has agreed to bring you back to camp if you behave badly," the warrior hissed, and suddenly, the apprentice's eyes glowed with sadness and fear. But it was whisked away quickly.

"My name's still being called out!" Her tail lashed.

"If you're still acting like this when the other Clans get here, then you won't be here to listen to it! Maybe I'll even ask Acornstar to leave it out." Lashing her own tail, the tortoiseshell warrior turned, flicking her ear for the apprentice to follow. After a moment, the white and silver she-cat stomped after her mentor.

Rowanpaw coughed to get the attention of the cats in front of them, and they looked over, seeming embarrassed. "I promise not all our cats are like that," the young tortoiseshell said.

Rowanpaw nodded, feeling bad for the apprentices. He would hate to have a cat like that in his Clan. "It's alright," he said, sizing up the she-cat. If BatClan did go to battle with EchoClan, by the time it happened this apprentice would likely be a warrior. Hopefully, she would stay away from apprentice fights that way, if she was fair.

On how she talked, Rowanpaw guessed she would fight fair.

"I'm Brightpaw," the she-cat said to change the subject. "This is Firepaw." She looked at the dark red tom, and Rowanpaw remembered meeting him at his last Gathering—he was the cat who treated him differently just because of his name. "And that's Willowpaw and Jaypaw." She nodded to the last two apprentices, who were both still staring after the white and silver she-cat, giving each other glances. "That was Blossompaw," Brightpaw explained. "Their sister. She's always had troubles with orders. That was her mentor, Maskdapple."

Rowanpaw nodded a greeting to them, and hesitated before saying, "I'm Ratpaw, and this is my brother, Blazepaw." His brother looked up from his paws and mewled a nervous greeting. He was spared from talking because of a new group of cats entering, led by a small and lithe cream-colored tom with a glowing white chest, legs, belly, and tail tip. His yellow eyes scanned the clearing as he took in the scene around him.

Rowanpaw knew he was the SageClan leader, but his name slipped from his mind. Next to him was a black she-cat with dark eyes, and he guessed that was the deputy. They both walked for the large oak tree, and a tan-brown tabby she-cat bounced after him. She was their medicine cat by the look of it, but he still couldn't recall their names. The SageClan warriors moved off to speak with the other Clans, meowing soft greetings, though Rowanpaw noticed few EchoClan and SageClan cats spoke to each other, and there was a tension between all of them.

Two cats seemed unaffected by it all—one a red-brown SageClan she-cat and the other a gray tabby tom from EchoClan. After a moment of talking, the tom slipped off into the bushes, and, after looking around her to make sure no cat was looking—her gaze went right over Rowanpaw—she quietly stalked after the gray tabby. Rowanpaw felt a soft urge to follow them, then decided against it. It likely had nothing to do with his Clan, so it didn't matter.

A light gray she-cat with darker patches came over to Rowanpaw and the EchoClan apprentices, mewling a happy greeting to Brightpaw, who returned it. Though the new apprentice was

SageClan, it seemed the apprentices had no quarrel with each other. "Hi, Lilypaw," Brightpaw meowed, then added, "this is Ratpaw and Blazepaw."

"Hello!" The she-cat gave a little bounce, and Rowanpaw suddenly realized how healthy the other Clan cats looked. Looking at both the Clan cats together, he looked at their muscular legs and healthy weights. He was suddenly aware of his lanky body and wished he could even have the tiniest more weight on him to make him look stronger.

Soon enough, the last Clan entered the hollow, with a small group like BatClan's, but their warriors were plump. Small and compact, the CrowClan warriors trotted into the hollow on short, thick legs, but Rowanpaw could see the long, curled claws that were sheathed but still visible. He could even see gleams of their long teeth from their muzzles, and he knew how bad a bite from even one of their kits was.

The lead cat was a little larger than her Clanmates, with shining white fur. A russet she-cat was next to her, persumedly her deputy. Near them was a ginger she-cat. Rowanpaw looked over to the large oak tree as EchoClan's leader climbed up the trunk with ease, going to the second lowest branch that was thick, and soft marks of old clawmarks were visible from past Gatherings. SageClan's leader climbed up after, struggling with his muscles rippling, until he reached the same branch. Acornstar didn't give him a single glance, even when one of his paws slipped as he moved past her.

Dawnstar followed him up, going slow and carefully with trouble. But she made it up soon enough and sat next to Acornstar, who then shifted away meaningfully. Her muzzle was curled, showing she believed Dawnstar smelled too bad to be right next to. Dawnstar hid any embarrassment she may have felt by holding her head high, ignoring the other leader meanfully. As soon as Whitestar, the CrowClan leader, joined them on the branch, sitting next to Dawnstar proudly to show Acornstar she was being unfair, the EchoClan leader yowled to signal the Gathering was to begin.

Brightpaw mewed a quick goodbye and moved off, and Rowanpaw led his brother back towards the river, where he took a quick few

laps before settling down by his brother's side. The deputies had crawled onto the branch underneath the leader's one and sat, while the medicine cats settled at the base of the tree. Acornstar stood up, not looking at her fellow leaders to decide who went first, taking that for herself.

"EchoClan is well," she began proudly. "Our medicine cat Goldenpool has had a litter of three strong kits, and we have added four new apprentices to our ranks—Willowpaw, Jaypaw, Ravenpaw, and Blossompaw." Because Rowanpaw knew the troublesome Blossompaw wasn't on good terms with her leader, he could detect the small hesitation in the leader's meow as she announced the apprentice's name, but if he hadn't known Blossompaw he knew he wouldn't have heard it. "Ravenpaw has decided to follow the path of a medicine cat, and has already proven himself to have a great skill."

Rowanpaw saw the small black tom at the EchoClan medicine cat's side slowly draw himself behind his mentor, ears down and large yellow eyes at his paws. Meanwhile, his three littermates—Rowanpaw assumed Blossompaw was his sister—stood proudly in the crowd. The one called Willowpaw seemed a little more hesitant than her brother and sister.

Acornstar turned to Whitestar and asked, "would you like to go next, Whitestar?" There was a note of hostility in her voice, and Rowanpaw guessed the EchoClan leader wasn't on good terms with the other three Clan leaders. Whitestar ignored the tone and dipped her head softly before standing, while Acornstar took her leave and sat.

"We also have a new litter," the white she-cat meoewed, "Fawnriver has given us Mistkit, Otterkit, and Twigkit. Prey is running well. We have nothing else to report." She nodded respectfully to Dawnstar to take over, and Rowanpaw could see a glare in Acornstar's eyes.

She's not a very good leader, he thought, knowing she should be making peace with the other leaders and not staring war. No wonder Dawnstar had chosen to attack EchoClan. Acornstar's arrogance was going to be her downfall sooner or later.

"BatClan will be strong this leaf-bare," Dawnstar began. "We have a queen with three kits, and two more queens with kits on the way," she meowed, and suddenly snorts and growls went through the clearing.

"Dawnstar, we know you want to pretend to be strong, but don't lie," Acornstar growled. "You don't have enough cats in your Clan to have that many queens."

"I didn't before," Dawnstar admitted. "But I have recently sent a few of my cats into the Twolegplace, and they returned with new warriors for my Clan."

For a moment, there was silence. Then Acornstar growled, "you mean rogues?"

"Loners," Dawnstar corrected, always hating the bad vibe the word "rogue" gave when spoken. Acornstar curled her lips in disgust, but she, surprisingly, allowed Dawnstar to speak. "They fought with my warriors against a fox attack, and one of their cats were killed while another gravely injured. My warriors made the right decision and invited them to join my Clan."

Rowanpaw made notice that she didn't mention Aspenheart was one of them, and felt a flash of happiness that his leader believed Aspenheart as much as a loner as her groupmates.

The leader continued: "They have been with my Clan for almost half a moon, and I found them all worthy to be a Clan cat. Just before we left, they received true Clan names. Their names are Hawktail, Hickoryclaw, Rainsong, Aspenheart, Wishpaw, Frenkit, Meadowkit, and Primkit." Some warriors seemed impressed by the number of cats, and the SageClan leader and Whitestar nodded acceptance, but Acornstar still looked distrusting.

"Aspenheart!" she growled mockingly. "Wasn't she a renegade warrior?" Acornstar's eyes glowed rudely. But Dawnstar didn't seem affected, which may have angered Acornstar more.

"She has learned her mistake of leaving, and I am giving her another chance. Three of the cats with her are her young kits,

making them half-BatClan." She seemed to add the last part out of spite, to give more reason on why she allowed the newcomers to stay in her Clan.

"Acornstar." The SageClan leader stood and looked at the other leader with a strong, respectful gaze. "Dawnstar has all reason to gain more cats for her Clan. You may not like it, but it is not your choice." Acornstar stared at him coldly, her fur bristling slightly, but after a moment she forced it back down and turned her head away.

Dawnstar looked at the SageClan leader, nodded a small thanks, then meowed, "you may speak, Robinstar."

Robinstar! That was his name! Rowanpaw wondered how he could've forgotten it.

"Our queen Hailsong is expecting her litter any day now, we have no new apprentices or warriors. Our prey is running well." The tom dipped his head to signal he was done speaking. Rowanpaw guessed he had wanted to finish quickly to avoid any more possible arguments.

"The Gathering is over," Acornstar meowed fiercely, getting to her paws. "Every cat that is not EchoClan, leave." There was no kindness or suggestion in her voice. It was a command. Normally, the other leaders wouldn't be subject to follow Acornstar's orders, but the sensitive leader was already on edge and they decided not to mess with her.

Hazelfur appeared through the cats and jerked her head for Rowanpaw to follow her, and Blazepaw joined them, though he departed when he saw Heronclaw. Dawnstar had leapt down from the tree and led the way through the bracken, with her small Clan following. Rowanpaw looked back into the clearing and watched the other Clans leaving, though EchoClan stayed and watched them go with guarded eyes. Except one.

A white she-cat with a black face, tail, ears, and legs was staring after his group. Her large eyes reminded him of the medicine cat apprentice's, and he decided she must be his mother. Hazelfur noticed his staring and meowed, "that's Snowfern. She was born in

BatClan but joined EchoClan to be with her mate."

Rowanpaw felt a shiver go up his spine. If he was right about her relationship to Ravenpaw and Ravenpaw's relationship to Snowfern, then that meant the four young EchoClan apprentices were half-BatClan, just like his sisters. He felt repulsed when he realized that meant the apprentice Blossompaw had his Clan's blood flowing through her.

Question #1: What are your thoughts of Rowanpaw in this new book?

Question #2: Do you think the loners deserved Clan names, and what do you think of the names they were given?

Chapter Three

It had been quite a while since Echo had sent Ravenpaw into the past, so it took him a moment to remember the tree that Bat and the others were sheltered under. Smoke and Flint were in the small clearing in front of the makeshift den, sharing a large fish, while Creek watched Bat and Sage from nearby.

Sage looked wary and was looking fiercely around the clearing before looking back at her kits, then back out again. Ravenpaw had seen their kitting a little over a quarter moon before, and now the four were maybe a moon old. She had four—the largest was Alder, a broad-shouldered gray-black tabby; near his size but with a slimmer build, Crow looked just like his father Bat; after that was Ash, a pretty silver-gray tabby with white unders; lastly was Echo, with fluffy silver fur and thick jagged black stripes.

While her littermates had since opened their eyes, she seemed to be less developed and they still stayed closed, so she lay at Bat's paws, trying to get to her paws blindly. Though her eyelids had begun to open, and Sage had finally agreed to let the kits venture outside to see the real world. Bat was hoping it would push little Echo to open her eyes. Ravenpaw was watching next to the older Echo, her transparent fur giving off a misty feel when it brushed against Ravenpaw's. Though he had just gotten here, Echo had explained Bat and Sage's thinking.

"Sage, I think she's opening her eyes," Bat said suddenly, and Ravenpaw looked forward with interest, eyes sparkling.

Quickly, Sage moved next to her mate, staring intently at her daughter as her face flicked and curled as she tried to move her eyelids. Then, they did, and her eyes opened wide for all to see. Ravenpaw felt chilled to his core—kit-Echo's eyes were a bright, cloudy white-gray color, not a soft blue like other kits.

"You... You were blind?" Ravenpaw asked softly, his spine fur on edge. When she didn't answer, Ravenpaw looked over into her bright, glowing green eyes, now with sight in their depths. She had a far off look in her

eye.

She meowed suddenly but softly, "it seems we are being cut short. Goodbye, Ravenpaw." He opened his jaws in denial, wanting to know why she had never told him she was blind, but the scene around him was whipped away suddenly.

"Mossrain!" the call cut through Ravenpaw's sleep, and he raised his head, worried about the fear in the meow but also annoyed he had just learned the first leader of his Clan was blind but he wasn't able to ask questions. The cat who had interrupted his dream was Petalpaw, who stood at the medicine cat's den entrance, shifting on his paws with worry.

Mossrain appeared a moment later from the back den, a bundle of old moss in his jaws. He dropped it and hurried forward. "What's wrong? Who's hurt?" His trained eyes could see that nothing was wrong with Petalpaw, Ravenpaw realized with awe. He would have guessed it was Petalpaw himself was injured; he wouldn't have even thought about another cat.

"Eagleclaw sent for a medicine cat. Goldenpool was sleeping, and I didn't want to interrupt her."

"What happened? Is Eagleclaw injured? I always told her not to climb to the topmost branches of a tree!" Mossrain hurried to the herb store as if his guess had already been confirmed.

"Eagleclaw's fine!" Petalpaw was quick to ensure the medicine cat his mentor was okay. "Blossompaw got in trouble again and is with Acornstar—she seemed really angry, and Eagleclaw said I needed to get you or Goldenpool. She said you would know what to do." His eyes sparkled in fear.

Mossrain looked over, and Ravenpaw could feel many different emotions coming from his mentor. Fear, worry, stress, all tangled together. After a quick heartbeat, Mossrain shook himself out of it, quickly grabbed a poppy head, and shook out a few seeds onto a nearby oak leaf. He took the oak leaf so the poppy seeds would stay in and hurried from the den, not even giving Ravenpaw or Petalpaw a second look.

Worry flared through Ravenpaw for his sister. He knew that he would possibly get in trouble for going after Mossrain to see what was wrong, but the urge to try to protect his sister was too strong and he raced after his mentor, his limbs stiff from sleep, and he tripped, sending pain flooding through one of his claws. But he went past Petalpaw without a second thought.

The late leaf-fall sun blinded his eyes, but he did his best to ignore it and went for the leader's den, where he could see Mossrain's tail disappearing under the waterfall, with the water falling heavier than he had seen in his past moons. Leaf-fall was causing the rivers to get larger, and he knew sometime in leaf-bare, depending on how bad the cold was, the waterfall would either be overflowing from the pool or just barely coming down.

Ravenpaw tried to decide what Blossompaw had done this time as he hopped over the stepping stones, feeling happy that the rocks took him a little away from the waterfall so when he leaped through he only got a heavy spray instead of a complete wash down. Just the waterdrops were enough to send shivers over his body, and he shook his fur to clear some of the water out.

Three days before, Ravenpaw had gone to the absolutely terrifying Gathering and he had seen Acornstar's true anger. Blossompaw had started her streak that night when she was disrespectful to another Clan's apprentice. When she returned to camp, she was told to take prey to Dappletail, but she instead ate it herself, which got her confined to camp. The morning after, the dawn patrol found her sneaking off into the forest as they were returning. Brightpaw was set to watch her instead of working towards her warriors' assessment, and Blossompaw slipped her while the guard was going to the dirtplace for a moment. After being found in the Gathering area pretending to be leader, Snowfern had taken over guarding her. It had proven to be the right move, for Blossompaw hadn't acted up since.

But now she was staring defiantly at her leader, standing tall with fluffed fur. Acornstar was pacing, while Eagleclaw watched with a guarded look from the back of the cave, though Ravenpaw could detect fear coming from her pelt. Mossrain hurried forward and dropped the poppy seeds down so Acornstar turned and looked

straight at them. She gave Mossrain a warning growl and continued her pacing, walking right over the seeds, her paws missing them by a whisker.

"Acornstar, eat them," Mossrain ordered, though his voice broke with slight fear. Acornstar flicked her tail dismissively.

"Not until I deal with her." Her tail flicked in Blossompaw's direction, and Ravenpaw pleaded silently that his sister would do something to show even the smallest bit of regret for her actions.

"Acornstar—" Mossrain tried to say, but the she-cat silenced him with a glance of furious eyes.

"No!" she hissed. "She is tarnishing the name of EchoClan with her foolish actions! She does not listen!"

"Acornstar!" Mossrain suddenly snapped, and the leader looked at him in surprise, clarity beginning to appear in her gaze. She looked at her paws, eyes wide. "We will deal with Blossompaw, you need to rest." He pushed the poppy seeds towards her, and she stared at them for a moment, even leaning her head down close to them.

Then she backed away, shaking her head. "No. I will punish her. It is my duty as a leader."

Ravenpaw suddenly heard claws scraping against stone, and the cats in the cave all looked to see Boulderclaw and Snowfern entering the den, side by side. Looking back at his sister, Ravenpaw could see the fear in her eyes.

"Acornstar," Boulderclaw began, moving forward with a respectful dip of his head, "I have had enough with Blossompaw acting out as well, and I have decided, with your permission, to take Blossompaw as my own apprentice, and give Firepaw to Maskdapple." He nodded to the tortoiseshell, who Ravenpaw hadn't noticed before, and she returned it, seemingly fine with the idea.

Acornstar looked like she was going to refuse, her tail flicking uncertainly. But then she forced a nod. "Fine. Just get her out of my den." After a pause, she added, "any future behavior of hers that

reflects badly on EchoClan will be reflected on you." Her eyes shone with an angry impatience, waiting for his answer. Boulderclaw nodded.

"I understand, Acornstar. I take full responsibility for training Blossompaw. I will make a warrior of her yet." The words rang through the air, and Ravenpaw saw his sister's tail lashing madly, but he believed it to be a cover for the fear and sadness that shined in her eyes.

Boulderclaw flicked his tail, and he led Blossompaw from the den. Snowfern followed but stopped to give Ravenpaw a lick on his forehead, and he made sure to keep his nose far from hers, not wanting to spy on his mother's future. She purred softly to him, clearly trying to distract his thoughts from his sister, then left the den, jumping gracefully from stone to stone until she reached the clearing.

Mossrain was talking with Acornstar, quietly getting her to eat the poppy seeds he had gotten for her, and he meowed, "rest for a while, Acornstar. Allow Eagleclaw to take over." The leader nodded numbly, the poppy seeds already taking effect. She lay in her nest and Mossrain and Eagleclaw quickly moved to leave the den.

Mossrain flicked his tail for his apprentice to follow, but because he was closest to Acornstar, he heard a quiet sound. "I can't do this much longer. Redcloud, how can I do this without you beside me?" Acornstar whispered under her breath, barely loud enough for Ravenpaw to hear.

Ravenpaw knew he should leave, so he hurried from the den, jumping across the stones, and quickly followed his mentor. When they made it back to the medicine cat's den, he asked, "Mossrain, do you know who Redcloud is?"

Mossrain turned to look at him, surprised, and asked, "where did you hear that name?"

"Acornstar said it," Ravenpaw explained. "She said something about not being about to do 'this' longer and that she didn't know how without Redcloud beside her."

Understanding flooded Mossrain's eyes, along with a small bit of sadness. "Redcloud was Acornstar's mate and deputy," he explained after a moment. "I'm sure you've noticed Acornstar's temper. It used to be nonexistent." He looked down at his paws, flexing out his claws.

"Until...?" Ravenpaw was surprised he had to edge Mossrain on, for how talkative he usually was.

"Until Redcloud died. He died quite a while before I was born, but Goldenpool told me many stories of Acornstar and him. Before he was gone, Acornstar visited the nursery every day and played with the kits and talked with the queens. Everybody expected her to have a new litter of kits, and soon enough she was expecting. Redcloud, as her deputy, took over as the leader for the time being. But Acornstar's kits were stillborn, and she fell into depression. Redcloud was the only one to make her feel better, and while she rested up and got stronger after the loss, Redcloud had to lead a battle patrol to attack a group of foxes who had moved into our territory.

"They fought the foxes off, but Redcloud died a few days later from infections in his wounds. Acornstar was completely broken, and now the duty to take care of the Clan fell on Goldenpool, for Acornstar refused to name a new deputy. There was confusion with no one to lead them--except for Goldenpool, of course--and Eagleclaw decided to take charge. She helped the Clan calm and was incredibly smart and a good leader. The Clan made her deputy without even bothering to ask Acornstar.

"A little before I became an apprentice, Acornstar began to come back into the world again, slowly at first, just going on a few patrols, but pretty soon she got back into the position you see her in now. We all thought she was better, but pretty soon she began to show impatience and anger. I hadn't even thought that she was still mourning after her lost mate." Mossrain dropped his head, seeming to be disappointed in himself.

"It sounds hard to go through," Ravenpaw murmured, imagining himself and his littermates never being alive, and a shiver went through him as he thought of his brother and sisters not allowed

life. All he wanted was for them to grow into warriors, and he pleaded to StarClan for all of them to make it, hopefully with Blossompaw better behaved.

Mossrain sniffed heavily, shaking his head to clear his mind. "We're still low on a few herbs, I'm going to go out and gather some."

Ravenpaw instantly got to his paws, ready to go with him, but Mossrain flicked his tail to hold him back.

"You stay at camp, I'll be back soon." Ravenpaw followed his mentor out of the den and saw him going to the warriors' den. He called inside, and a moment later Pebblepeak emerged. They talked quietly together, then they padded away together. Pebblepeak stopped by the apprentices' den and called in, and after a moment Willowpaw's head emerged. He talked to her quietly for a moment, then she disappeared again and the two littermates left camp together.

Ravenpaw hoped to have a similar relationship when he was older. He almost went to his sister, but then decided on instead of going to Snowfern, who was settled in the clearing, eating a mouse. He bounded up and crouched next to her, rubbing his forehead against her shoulder, purring and taking in her soft, sweet scent that had helped him calm throughout the seven moons of his short life. She purred in return and touched her nose to his forehead.

"Hello, little one," she said softly, quickly finishing her mouse then laying down and allowing Ravenpaw to curl into her stomach as he had as a kit. Warmth enveloped him, and he suddenly felt safer than ever before, and all his thoughts traveled away, except the one he focused on.

"Snowfern, did you ever lose any kits?" He didn't hold back, knowing idle chatter wouldn't help, and he wanted to know the answer, to know if his mother went through the pain Acornstar had. Fear traveled through him as felt a shudder go through his mother's stomach. He stayed quiet, and after a moment, she began her story.

"You know I'm originally from BatClan, right?" she asked, and after he nodded, she continued. "Boulderclaw and I met when I was still

a BatClan apprentice, and we met up every Gathering. After I became a warrior, we met on other nights as well. He talked to Acornstar and she, somehow, agreed to allow me into EchoClan. I had planned to say yes, but then someone very close to me died, and I stopped meeting him.

"After a few moons we started meeting again, and nothing was said about his question. Then, after a few meetings, he asked again. I wanted to, but I had something that held me back--I was expecting his kits. They would be future warriors of BatClan. Good, strong cats. But they would be starving every day, and I pictured them dying like my littermates and so many others of my Clan.

"I was planning to go with Boulderclaw overnight in half a moon, but before that day came I lost my litter. I couldn't face Boulderclaw after that. I had told him I wanted to wait longer, to help my Clan as much as I could before I left, but because I stayed my kits didn't get enough prey and couldn't survive. It was moons before I saw Boulderclaw again. He was so upset he lost the kits, but wouldn't let me leave him. I wanted to go with him, but I had a duty to my Clan.

"He said he did not want to me to end up the same as my Clanmates, starving to death. Finally, I agreed to join him. And I never looked back. At least, I tried to never look back. I was scared to have another litter, but I finally did. That was Stonecoat and Shadefur. After my stillborn litter, I never lost another kit."

Snowfern was quiet for a long moment after she finished, staring at her paws with waves of sadness coming from her. Quietly and softly, Ravenpaw tucked himself closer to his mother, feeling strong regret for forcing her into painful memories. They lay there in silence for quite a while, listening to the soft breeze.

Ravenpaw felt himself dozing off, despite his mother's sad past that still lay fresh in his mind. He hoped to be visited by Echo so he could finish his visit to the past, but he knew she visited him when he was deep in sleep, and currently, he was drifting in and out of consciousness. Everything went black and quiet, then the warm feeling of his mother returned and he could hear the daily sound of the camp, then back into the black silence.

In and out he went, he didn't know for how long until he realized that when he drifted away he couldn't feel his mother's heat anymore. Forcing his eyes open despite his sleepiness, he found he was resting in the clearing alone. His mother was nowhere to be seen, and her scent was faint. He looked at the sun, and he saw the sun was already sinking down the sky. Last he had seen, the sun was still rising. He had been asleep for half the day, right in the middle of the clearing.

Ravenpaw yawned, stretching his jaws open and shaking his head to clear it. Licking his jaws, his stomach suddenly rumbled and growled in hunger. Winching, he forced himself to his paws and stumbled tiredly to the fresh-kill pile. Sniffing around, he found a warm vole, and he took it to the front of the medicine cat's den, settling down to eat. The vole tasted wonderful in his mouth and stomach, and he told himself once again vole was his favorite. Bird was tough and mouse was stringy, but vole was chewy and sweet.

"Ravenpaw, you're awake!" Willowpaw came bouncing through the clearing. "Pebblepeak told me I had to wait until you woke up!" She flicked her tail and stood next to him, eyes glowing. "Mossrain wants you to come training with us!"

Ravenpaw tilted his head, confused. "Training?"

She snorted. "Battle, hunting, normal apprentice things!" She rolled her eyes.

It was his turn to snort. "I'm not a normal apprentice," he meowed, feeling a small pang in his heart as he was reminded of the wedge that divided him from his littermates.

"You still need to learn to fend for yourself!" she retorted excitedly. "Come on, we're meeting the others at the training hollow!" She bounced from paw to paw as she waited for him.

He looked at her for a moment with a tilted head, waiting for her to say something else, but she was waiting rather impatiently. Deciding his fate was already laid out for him, Ravenpaw quickly finished his vole and got to his paws, shaking out his fur. Willowpaw squealed and hurried off. Grumbling and knowing he'd

regret it, Ravenpaw got up and followed his littermate to the moorland camp entrance.

They jumped down the rocky pathway to the smooth moor grass, though after Willowpaw almost slipped she continued down more carefully. Reaching the soft grassy land, the two littermates traveled for the nearby dip in the ground that created a nice place for training. Ravenpaw had visited it once with Mossrain, though no cats had been training at the time. Excitement but also fear filled him at the idea of watching the training.

The scents of Pebblepeak, Foxpounce, and Jaypaw came to him. Excited by the smell of his brother, Ravenpaw quickened his pace and peered into the dip in the ground. Jaypaw was facing his mentor, Foxpounce, with a lashing tail. Pebblepeak was sitting on the side and flicked his tail for the two apprentices to join him. The two hurried over quickly and settled down, watching their littermate with interest.

The two toms were circling each other, with Jaypaw so focused on his mentor he hadn't even noticed his siblings watching him. His fur was puffed and his pale gray ears were flat against his head, while his green eyes were narrowed and focused. Then, the apprentice leaped.

He headed straight on, but then leaped to the left, sliding next to Foxpounce's side with his tail tucked in tightly. Ravenpaw was confused by the action, then saw the older tom lash out with sheathed claws towards Jaypaw's legs, trying to catch a swinging tail. With it tucked in, Foxpounce's paw went harmlessly through the air.

Jaypaw, quick as a fish leaping from the water, slid underneath Foxpounce, twisting onto his back and—sliding along the ground—he pushed with his back paws against his mentor's open stomach. If Jaypaw had been older and stronger, it was likely he could have sent Foxpounce flying, but because of the older tom's weight, he only stumbled away unsteadily.

It seemed Jaypaw had expected more, and he hesitated for a moment while trying to think of what to do. He scrambled to his

stomach and tried to get to his paws, but Foxpounce had gained his senses again and leaped back, pinning his apprentice to the ground. The warrior had a heavy paw in between the young cat's shoulders, holding him down firmly. Jaypaw wiggled aimlessly, then went still, giving up.

Ravenpaw felt bad for his brother, having had such a good idea with his mock-fight, and Foxpounce seemed to agree, losing his grip on the young tom. He began to open his mouth to say something, but then Ravenpaw noticed a strain in his brother's legs and realized what was going to happen a moment before it did.

Jaypaw suddenly pushed off the ground, forcing his weight against Foxpounce's paw. The warrior, in his surprise, could not react in time and stumbled back. Quickly, Jaypaw whipped around and went straight for his mentor, paws stretched out. His paws slammed into Foxpounce's chest and they rolled backward, small white and gray shape rolling with a larger fiery-red one. For a moment, they were a rolling mess, then Jaypaw was pinned again, this time on his back with one of Foxpounce's paws pressing on his chest. It was obvious the tom was not going to let up again so easily.

"Good move, Jaypaw," Foxpounce panted, tail flicking, ready for a new challenge. "We're done for now, though." He waited for Jaypaw to nod in understanding, then backed away, still looking ready for an attack of revenge. Many younger cats would be frustrated about defeat and would try to attack again. Jaypaw seemed to get the message, though, and standing, he shook out his fur then licked at his chest fur.

Suddenly, he noticed his littermates, and embarrassment flickered through his eyes before he forced it away with excitement as he looked at his brother. "You're joining us!" he mewled excitedly, hurrying forward and going to touch noses with his brother. Quickly, Ravenpaw avoided it. Jaypaw looked upset, but Ravenpaw quickly mended it by touching Jaypaw's muzzle with his, keeping their noses apart. This seemed to be good enough for Jaypaw, and he sat next to his sister with a contented flick of his tail. Willowpaw gave him a mew of greeting.

"Hello, Ravenpaw." Foxpounce walked up and dipped his head

respectfully, sending a shiver through Ravenpaw. He was barely an apprentice, but yet the warrior treated him with great respect just because of his status as a medicine cat. "I remember Mossrain mentioning you'd be coming to training one day soon."

"I don't see why," Ravenpaw couldn't help but say. "There's a reason I'm not training as a warrior," he pointed out.

Foxpounce purred in amusement, while Pebblepeak meowed, "even medicine cats need to know how to defend themselves. Mossrain's my littermate, remember. He trained with me once and a while even though he was a medicine cat."

"That still doesn't make sense," Ravenpaw argued, mostly to postpone having to fight, even as practice. "I'm not going to be in battles or anything. And the other Clans know not to attack a medicine cat."

"Does a fox know that?" Foxpounce intervened quietly, head tilted and eyes curious. "Or the Twolegs? Or one of the dogs the Twolegs brought with them?" Ravenpaw shivered, remembering when the patrols had first brought in the news of the scents and sights of dogs with the Twolegs who had invaded their territory.

"I..." Ravenpaw dropped his head in defeat. "I guess you're right," he sighed, getting to his paws.

Pebblepeak purred sympathetically. "Just a few simple moves, I promise. Why don't you go up against Willowpaw, and Jaypaw and I can show you what to do."

Foxpounce sat at the edge of the small hollow, watching the apprentices and young warrior with interest. He was the oldest here and was probably going to help Pebblepeak if he had any troubles with training three different apprentices. Meanwhile, Pebblepeak went to the middle of the hollow and faced Jaypaw, with Ravenpaw and Willowpaw matching them.

"We can start with a simple avoidance to the front paw swipe." Without warning, Pebblepeak swiped at Jaypaw, and the apprentice ducked, sweeping to the side. It was obvious he was holding back

swiping with his own paw, he had realized this was not a fighting move, but a defensive move for his brother. Pebblepeak nodded in approval, then meowed, "Willowpaw, you try it on Ravenpaw."

His sister waited a moment to make sure he was ready, then swiped her paw through the air. Ravenpaw flinched back violently, sending a pain through his neck at the quick movement. No cat seemed to mention it, though, and he was glad.

"Ravenpaw, you try on Willowpaw, now."

Ravenpaw nodded, flexing his claws for a moment before sheathing them as much as he could, then he raised his paw, trying to move it more, but it was like it was stuck in place. Finally, he managed to swipe out at his sister, but it was slow and not out far enough to even reach her. She barely had to move her head back to avoid it.

She purred in amusement at her brother's scared eyes. "Don't worry, Ravenpaw, you won't hurt me." She seemed to be able to tell his fear of accidentally hurting her, and he looked at her, grateful, before forcing himself to swipe again, this time with more speed with his paw stretched out farther.

Willowpaw dodged easily, then suddenly reached out her own paw skillfully toward's her brother's head. Shocked, Ravenpaw's limbs went stiff and he closed his eyes, ready for the blow. It didn't come. He opened his eyes to see Willowpaw's paw barely a whisker's length from him. He looked at her fearfully.

"Ravenpaw, you were supposed to duck," Pebblepeak said softly, and Ravenpaw looked at him, then nodded quickly, shaking out his thin coat to remind himself he was still there.

All the cats were quiet for a moment, then Jaypaw meowed, "well, I guess it's a good thing he became a medicine cat, huh?"

Question #1: What are your thoughts of Acornstar—do you think her past qualifies her to act this way?

Question #2: Did you like the look into Snowfern's past? Would you like to see more of it, in the form of its own book, or just in

more stories throughout this series?

Question #3: What are your thoughts about Echo being blind?

Chapter Four

It was still dark, with the sun barely lighting the sky orange when Blossompaw was woken from sleep. At first, she didn't know what had woken her, and she tiredly curled closer to Jaypaw and Willowpaw, still feeling sore from her training session the day before with her father. On her first day as an apprentice to her father, he had forced her to spend the entire day cleaning out the apprentices' den, nursery, and elders' den with him watching, then the next day they had gone hunting from sunrise to sunset with barely any breaks.

Since she had returned she had been sleeping peacefully, but now she was struggling to go back to sleep. She almost went back into the dream where she was chasing a plump mouse, then something sounded again. It was her name, coming from a deep, strong voice outside the den. After a moment, she recognized it as her father's and forced herself from the nest, groaning as her muscles screeched in protest.

Climbing out from the den, she stood next to Boulderclaw, shaking out her fur. "What do you want?" she growled, "I worked all day yesterday, I'm tired."

"A true warrior doesn't act that way," Boulderclaw said instantly, shaking out his recently-groomed fur. "They are always willing to help their Clan at whatever time. You are a true warrior, aren't you? Because you always seem like you think you are." Boulderclaw didn't give her a chance to reply. "Now, let's head out." He turned and padded confidently towards the forest camp entrance.

"I want to eat first!" she growled, stalking over to the fresh-kill pile and grabbing a mouse. She was ready to take a bite out of it, but it was swiped away from under her jaws by her father, who swallowed it in two quick bites.

"I'm famished!" he decided. licking his jaws clean. "Thanks for

grabbing that for me. Since you haven't hunted yet, you can't have anything to eat. So we better get going." Boulderclaw turned around and trotted confidently to the camp entrance. Blossompaw felt a growing rage inside of her but forced herself to follow, trying to ignore the twisting hunger in her stomach. She had been so tired yesterday she hadn't eaten, and now she regretted it. Once she caught something, she would eat that, then she would find something else to give to the cats who were too lazy to hunt themselves.

Like her brother.

A sudden pain of sadness and regret filled her heart as she pictured Ravenpaw's bright, shining yellow eyes. She remembered when they used to play together as young kits, and for a long moment, she wished times were that simple.

You're weak, a soft voice said inside her head, and Blossompaw flicked an ear, trying to rid herself of it as she followed her father into the forest.

She still cares about her brother, another voice whispered softly from another part of her mind.

She cares about the weakling who can't hunt for himself, the first voice said again.

No, I don't! Blossompaw argued with herself silently. She didn't care about Ravenpaw—she didn't! She pushed the painful memories of her brother away and focused on following her new mentor, clenching her teeth tightly to distract herself from the conversation that was happening in her head. Luckily, the voices went quiet for a few moments.

Suddenly, Boulderclaw stopped in front of a thick-trunked oak tree and turned to look at his daughter with an unreadable, memorizing green gaze. "Climb," he ordered firmly. When she hesitated, her muscles groaning in protest at the thought of climbing the tree, he added, "unless you're scared."

"I'm not scared!" she hissed, unsheathing her claws, and she went to

the tree, digging her young claws into the bark and pulling herself up. She went up slowly, her body loathing the exercise so early in the morning, and fire ran through her muscles. But she continued to climb up, gasping for breath, until she reached the lowest branch, where she crawled out and held on tightly.

"You must go higher," Boulderclaw meowed firmly, and suddenly crawled up the tree like a squirrel, making it almost halfway up the tree in just a few heartbeats. Blossompaw stared after him with wide eyes.

"I can't!" she couldn't stop herself from saying, hating the whining tone in her mew.

The she-kit can't, the voice in her head whispered.

The kit's not strong enough, another answered. Blossompaw did her best to shut them out.

"There is never a can't," Boulderclaw called down smoothly. "Only a won't."

"There is too!" Blossompaw responded immediately, glad to have the chance to prove her father wrong. "Cats *can't* fly!"

Through the thick branches, with the leaf layers falling for the forest floor, Blossompaw was able to make out her father's sparkling, wisdom-filled eyes. "How can you know if you've never tried?" Boulderclaw meowed.

Blossompaw stared at him as if he was crazy. "Because cats can't fly!" she growled, though after getting angry at having to yowl upward at her father, she forced herself to climb up the tree. When she finally made it to his branch, Boulderclaw stepped farther onto the bark to allow her room to stand. She crouched instantly, stretching her claws into the bark, while Boulderclaw stood lightly, claws sheathed.

"Perhaps not like birds," Boulderclaw said after a moment of silence, "but we can still fly." Without warning, Boulderclaw took off down the branch like a mouse escaping from a hunter, and he took a

soaring leap from the tree, sending the branch swinging under his weight, and Blossompaw struggled to hold on. She watched in awe as her father flew through the sky and landed neatly on a tree nearby. He looked back at her expectantly. "Are you coming?"

"I ca—" Blossompaw cut herself off, but, with her anger growing, she hissed, "I can't jump that far!"

"Won't," Boulderclaw corrected, much to his daughter's fury. "Nothing is impossible." Unexpectedly, he added, "we all have dark and light inside of us, Blossompaw. What matters is the direction we take. We all have weaknesses and strengths. You need to get over here some way. Would you rather follow your own path back down the tree to climb back up the trunk of this one to avoid the fight, or face it head on by leaping across?"

His gaze looked challenging into hers. A shiver went through Blossompaw, and her eyes narrowed. Flexing her claws, she took off over the branch, trying to ignore the flashing ground under her, and leaped from the tree. For a moment, there was nothing but air under her, and she felt a flash of panic but also freedom before she crashed down onto the branch next to her father, digging her claws into the wood.

She looked up into his eyes and saw a glimmer of pride in the depths of green. She felt a flash of excitement at showing her father her strength, then forced it away. "Good choice," he meowed, then turned and whipped away. He bounded across the branch and pounced from branch to branch to make it to the other side of the tree, where he leaped onto a branch of a nearby birch. Then he looked back and waited for his daughter.

Growling softly, Blossompaw ignored her crying muscles and followed her father's path, digging her claws into the clawmarks of old warriors of her Clan as she followed. Right as she landed on the birch, Boulderclaw took off again. Feeling a flash of resentment but also a challenging flare, she raced after him.

Every time she jumped, she dug her claws into the wood and had to go as far to the end of the branch before leaping. But she realized something that her father was doing—he took a run over the

branch, claws sheathed as he jumped and even as he landed, though there didn't even seem to be the smallest chance of him falling.

"How do you do that?" she couldn't help but say as she landed on the branch next to him.

"Do what?" he seemed generally curious, not taunting her.

"Jump with your claws in."

Understanding flooded Boulderclaw's eyes, and he raised one paw, looking at his rough, tough pads. "My pads have hardened over the seasons, to the point they can keep me steady. Having my claws out run the risk of getting them caught in the wood. A lot of warriors still use their claws, but older warriors, like my littermates and I, have been training for so long our pads are used to the rough bark enough to give us a connection. It's dangerous if you don't know what you're doing."

Blossompaw convinced herself she saw a challenging stare in his gaze, and she flexed her claws into the wood before sheathing them. Boulderclaw looked down, his eyes shining with disappointment. "Blossompaw, do not risk your safety in attempt to prove yourself. You have nothing you need to prove--work hard, but work safe."

"Any more words of wisdom?" she growled, frustrated her father thought her as lesser than him--she could do anything he could!

"A river cuts through a rock not because of its power, but because of its persistence." His eyes were dark and deep, completely still except for the smallest movement of his whiskers from the wind. He seemed so calm, despite Blossompaw trying to get him to lose his temper, like she had with Maskdapple many times. Not being able to anger him sent her blood boiling

"Power is everything!" she said after a few moments of silence, not knowing what else to say. Boulderclaw blinked.

"Cats can fight and fight and fight, but sometimes even the sharpest claw cannot make a wound." Something dark whispered through his

eyes, and in a blink of Blossompaw's eyes he was gone, flashing across the trees like a snake striking its prey. His daughter leaped after him, ignoring her burning muscles.

As she landed her first jump, her claws instinctively reached and gripped the bark. Withdrawing them, she leaped to the next branch, making sure to hold them in. She landed, and with her soft pads unable to hold her still, one of her back paws slipped. She pressed her stomach against the bark, gripping the branch with her claws as fear flared through her.

Weakling, a voice whispered in her ear, and she quickly closed her eyes, as if that would get the voice to silence itself. It just seemed to get louder, though. *What a warrior you'll make,* it mocked.

She'll be an apprentice forever, another whispered in the other side of her head, and she opened her eyes and looked around quickly, searching for a cat that could be talking to her. The forest was clear of any life, except for a finch crying out from a hidden tree. Even Boulderclaw had disappeared, and for a moment Blossompaw wished her father would return.

She wants her father, the first voice hissed.

She's as whiny as a kit, the second replied.

She is *a kit,* a new tone said.

No, I'm not! Blossompaw struggled to get the voices out of her head. Gripping the branch tight in her claws, Blossompaw started moving again, this time ignoring the voices in her head and using her claws to stay balanced. She followed the faint trail of her father's scent, though the tossing wind made it hard to follow.

Soon enough, it was completely gone, and Blossompaw pressed against the trunk of the tree, using it to steady her swaying body. She was tired, and her legs ached in pain, muscles strained to their limit. Unable to stand in the tree any longer, Blossompaw awkwardly climbed down until she could jump safely, but the impact sent pain through her paws and she collapsed, gasping in pain and shock.

For a long moment she lay there, wishing to be young again when she could curl into her mother's belly and play with Ravenpaw before he became so important and more loved. She wanted to go back to when her parents still loved her the same as Ravenpaw, the perfect little kit. They liked him because he was obedient.

She remembered half a moon ago, when she was woken by her frantic mother calling for Ravenpaw. She had been burning with jealousy that he disappeared for a few heartbeats and Snowfern was going crazy, then she found out about the Twolegs, and she had been swarmed by fear--fear that her brother might be injured by a Twoleg or one of their dogs. She had wondered if her mother would have given her the same treatment if it had been her to disappear.

Suddenly, Blossompaw heard the crackling of twigs break under a heavy paw. She raised her head, ears perked. She could hear something moving in the shadows, stalking behind underbrush to avoid being seen. She tried to scent the creature stalking her, but it was downwind, giving her nothing but the smells of the forest.

It was large, with a quite rumble coming from it, allowing her to track it as paced back and forth right outside her vision. Fear stopped Blossompaw from swallowing, and she took a small step backwards. The underbrush rustled as the creature came closer. Not able to stand still anymore, Blossompaw turned tail and ran.

She thundered through the woods, fatigue forgotten in her terror. She didn't know the territory well, and continued to trip as she tried to evade obstacles around her. The creature behind her was getting closer, and closer, and closer. She heard its paws leave the ground, and a suddenly smell of cat washed through her as she was tackled.

She fought weakly, yowling as she twisted and turned, but her opponent was much larger and wasn't even fazed. It trapped her on her stomach, and she felt its breath on her neck. She was ready for a deadly bite on the back of her scruff, and she focused on thoughts of her kithood with her brother.

Then, a voice.

"Dead."

Boulderclaw stepped away, allowing Blossompaw to struggle to her paws. She turned to face him, eyes wide with surprise and terror. "Why did you do that?" she demanded, trying to sound strong, but her mew broke.

"To see how you react to a danger that may hurt your Clan. I doubt you even thought about anyone a strange creature may hurt." His eyes were hard, but a light shine of curiosity shined through.

Blossompaw felt a strong rage. "How was I when I thought I was going to die?" she growled, fur bristling and spine curled.

"How could you not?" Boulderclaw replied evenly, raising his head. "Your only duty is to protect your Clan. Everything you do is to make sure they survive."

"That's unfair!" Blossompaw hissed coldly. "I deserve to live too! I can take care of myself, and so can they!" Her claws flexed out into the ground.

Boulderclaw was still calm, looking at his daughter with the lightest shine of disappointment. "If you truly believe that, then leave." He turned around without another word and left her alone.

Question #1: What are your thoughts on Boulderclaw's teaching method?

Chapter Five

Ravenpaw watched with amusement as Stormkit rolled on the nursery ground, caught in a tussle with Dustkit that was obviously going her way. Her kit-fluffed brown tabby fur was bristling, and she had mock aggression in her eyes as they broke away. She dug her sharp kit claws into the ground, snarling playfully. Dustkit stared back with a similar snarl. He launched himself forward on unsteady paws, and Stormkit squealed and ran back to Goldenpool's nest, tucking behind her golden tabby mother, though after a moment her glowing gold eyes peaked over her mother's back, ears flat.

Dustkit ran for her, and she disappeared again. Dustkit scrambled into the nest and raced over his mother's side, and she grunted with amusement. Dustkit raised his head again, searching the nursery, and Ravenpaw guessed Stormkit wasn't there. As he turned his head away, Ravenpaw spotted Stormkit sneaking out from under her mother's neck where she had tucked herself away, and she raced to Ravenpaw, hiding behind his lean frame right as Dustkit looked back again.

Stormkit squealed, and Ravenpaw looked back to see that Heatherkit had come from hiding and attacked her sister. Yowling in his weak kit tone, Dustkit bounded on his soft, stubby legs to his sisters and cannoned into them. Ravenpaw scooted away from the tussling kits, watching them in amusement. Stormkit was getting overpowered by both her littermates, so he decided to nudge Dustkit with his nose to free his sister, and added a small push to Heatherkit.

The kit squealed like she had been wounded and rolled away with amusement, while Stormkit leaped up and tackled Dustkit, mewling and wiggling. Heatherkit tried to attack as well, wanting to team up with her brother, but Ravenpaw kept her back with a paw, so she went for his muzzle instead, small kit-claws swiping at his whiskers.

Ravenpaw scooted away, then got into a playful crouch, whiskers twitching. Heatherkit rocked her haunches and was about to leap, when Ravenpaw was distracted by a cat calling for him from the clearing. "Ravenpaw!" He straightened, much to Heatherkit's disappointment, and waved his tail in goodbye before leaving the den and emerging into the pale sunlight.

Jaypaw looked over his where he was licking his paw, and stood, shaking out his fur. "Mossrain said you'd be in there! It was a *big* surprise," Jaypaw taunted playfully, and Ravenpaw purred.

"What do you need?" He touched his brother's cheek with his nose, enjoying his forest-cat scent.

"I'm going out to get moss, and I thought you'd like to get some herbs. When I asked Mossrain about it, he said to grab feverfew and dock. One should be by a big patch of moss, but I can't remember which."

"That'd be dock," Ravenpaw was proud that he knew the answer. Wanting to prove his self worth, he added, "dock's used to soothe scratches, while feverfew cools down a cat's body temperature."

Jaypaw showed no sign of recognition, and after a moment he flicked away for the camp entrance. Feeling like he was annoying his brother, Ravenpaw ducked his head and pattered after him, trying to keep his pawsteps quiet. They almost made it to the forest entrance unnoticed.

"Where are you two going?" The brothers turned their heads in excitement at the voice. Boulderclaw was padding over, Blossompaw no where in sight, to Ravenpaw's slight disappointment.

"I'm going to collect moss for Dappletail and Ravenpaw is getting herbs," Jaypaw answered innocently. Almost *too* innocently.

"Do you want some company?" Boulderclaw asked calmly.

"No!" Jaypaw squeaked, fur puffing. "Just some brotherly time," he mended after a moment.

Boulderclaw looked at them suspiciously, then meowed, "stay near camp. Those Twolegs are still out there." Then he turned and padded away. Jaypaw let out a sigh of relief and hurried from the camp, bounding down the rocks.

Ravenpaw scrambled behind him, and asked as they reached the forest ground, "so where are we really going?" He greatly suspected his brother had been lying about their intentions.

"I want to explore," Jaypaw answered, "without Foxpounce on my tail all the time. I want a break from constant training."

"I don't know," Ravenpaw said hesitantly as he followed his brother through the bushes. "We could get in trouble, and Mossrain is expecting that feverfew and dock..."

"We'll pick some up on our way home," Jaypaw meowed confidently, taking a happy little leap over a tree root. Ravenpaw took a careful step, not wanting to trip, before hurrying to catch up to his brother, avoiding a bush while Jaypaw pushed right past it, his thick fur keeping him free of scratches.

The two littermates continued on for some while, in the direction Ravenpaw remembered taking to get to the Gathering. Traveling along a heavy trail, grass flattened from generations of pawsteps, the brothers got farther and farther from camp and closer to the territory boundary. Ravenpaw's pads were raw and burning by the time they finally entered the clearing of the Gathering Hollow, and Jaypaw took a deep breath of air.

Ravenpaw sniffed as well, then flinched as a branch cracked somewhere in the trees. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Jaypaw was barely listening to his brother, going to the stream in the hollow and taking cooling licks. Ravenpaw hurried to stay by his side.

"I heard something, in the forest." Ravenpaw suddenly remembered his father's warning, and felt dread drop into his gut, weighing him down. "What if it's a Twoleg? Or one of their dogs?"

"No way!" Jaypaw snorted. "They're way down near SageClan territory, where they found the Twoleg! They're no where around us." He leaned down to continue drinking, but stopped when there was rustling bushes, and looked over. Instead of fear or surprise in his gaze, Ravenpaw could see excitement in Jaypaw's eyes.

Ravenpaw opened his jaws to say something, but then a cat slipped from the bushes. Her fur bristled, light green eyes flashing with anger. "What is *he* doing here?" Blossompaw hissed, looking at Ravenpaw.

I'm sorry for the short chapter and the extremely long break (and the bad writing) but I've been having the worst writers' block with this story. I hope you can still enjoy.

Chapter Six

Jaypaw had told her to meet him here for them to get away from the annoyance of the Clan, not to meet up with *Ravenpaw*. Blossompaw was furious with her brother, eyes shining with anger. "Why did you bring him here?" she hissed when no one answered her previous question.

"So you can stop being so mean!" Jaypaw growled. "I hate how you two are always fighting! It's so mouse-brained! You two were so close, and I just want that again."

"It's *his* fault!" Blossompaw hissed, flicking her ears in Ravenpaw's direction, who lowered his head in defeat and sadness. "He's the one who betrayed us by becoming a medicine cat!"

Jaypaw curled his muzzle and moved his head back. "So what if he wants to be a medicine cat? He's helping his Clan be stronger! More than you will ever do."

Blossompaw snarled at him. "When I'm leader, I'll get rid of medicine cats! We don't need them!"

Jaypaw scoffed, throwing his head. "You'll never be leader--not with that attitude! When will you learn that every cat has a reason to be in this Clan? Just wait until you need to be healed!"

"I'll heal like any cat should!" Blossompaw growled, "naturally!"

"I brought you here to realize your mistakes!" Jaypaw growled, "not pick more fights! Why are you like this? It's not like this gives you any friends."

"I have plenty of friends!" Blossompaw sneered.

Jaypaw shook his head, and his mew went quiet. "You should've

heard them at the Gathering. How *embarrassed* they were of you. How embarrassed *I* was of you."

Agonizing fear went through Blossompaw, but also hate at her brother's ignorance. "You'll regret this someday! When I'm better than all of you!"

Jaypaw's eyes suddenly went wide, and his fur began to bristle. Near him, Ravenpaw sucked in a breath and his muscles went stiff. "Blossompaw, don't move until I say. Then, *run*."

Angry from his antics, Blossompaw ignored her brother and whipped around, looking where her brothers were. And was absolutely terrified to see glowing golden eyes coming from the shadows. A sudden strong, disgusting scent came to Blossompaw's nose, and she was shocked she hadn't smelled it before. It let out a deep, rumbling growl, and stepped free from the bushes.

It was huge!

Its muscles rippled under a thick coat, and its long muzzle was lined with sharp, shining white teeth. The ears were large and flattened against its broad brown and black head. Blossompaw remembered stories from the nursery and elders--it was a dog. A monstrously-sized dog.

She locked eyes with it, terrified, and it moved with lightning quick speed, huge paws throwing up tufts of soil. Blossompaw ran, but her mind flashed to Ravenpaw. He didn't know how to fight--he knew nothing. He was weak and useless. She could feel the dog's breath on her tail, and she remembered her father when he pretended to attack her. She could fend for herself, and she would prove it. And she would protect her brother.

She whirled around and jumped at the dog's face. It was obviously surprised and growled as her sharp claws dug into its face. She didn't know much about fighting, but she was smart enough to latch her claws right around its eyes. It yowled and threw its head fiercely. Her back paws came unlatched and she was thrown around for a few moments, barely holding onto its face.

Then it gave another great throw of its head and she went flying. She heard a faint yowl that she recognized as Ravenpaw's, then she slammed against the back of a tree. A horrible, flaring pain went through her spine, and she fell limply onto the ground. Her eyes flickered open, and she found her gaze blurred. Everything was hard to see, but there was a large, fuzzy shape heading towards her.

I want a POV change already, so this will be my shortest chapter and will end now, but the next should be up as soon as possible (the same day as now, I believe)

Chapter Seven

Ravenpaw watched in absolute horror as his sister's white and silver frame was thrown through the air and smashed with a heavy *thump!* against the side of an oak tree. His claws dug into tree branch of the tree he was in, desperately wanting to leap down to his sister's aid as the enormous dog moved towards her. Next to him, Jaypaw flexed his muscles and leaped form the tree, not even bothering to climb down.

He raced for the dog, yowling a curse, but it didn't distract the dog--it was still going for Blossompaw, who could barely even move her head. Ravenpaw saw her open her eyes, and was horrified by the glossy stare in her gaze. Then, a shape flew from the bushes, a flash of gray and white. It landed in front of the dog and lashed out with sharp claws. Ravenpaw thought it was his brother, but Jaypaw was still racing across the clearing...

Then, it hit him with a shock. Boulderclaw! He thanked StarClan for his father's great sense of danger and prayed for their safety, as he had already done quite a few times since the dog appeared. The dog jumped back as Boulderclaw caught it's eye, splattering blood everywhere. He growled and hissed and puffed his fur to make him look twice his size.

The dog snapped at him, but Boulderclaw didn't flinch, instead he scratched the monster's nose. When it drew back, Boulderclaw leaped at it, teeth flashing. Just as Blossompaw had done, Boulderclaw attached himself to its face, his claws digging deep into the skin right around the dog's eyes. It cried and screeched and threw its body, trying to get the warrior off, but he was trained by countless moons and held on tight.

"Don't you dare attack my kits!" Boulderclaw was yowling as he bit deep into the dog's ear, and it collapsed, rolling onto its back to free itself, and the tom finally jumped away. Not wasting any time, the

dog turned and fled, blindly running through the bushes and whimpering for its Twoleg.

Ravenpaw struggled down the tree and raced to his sister's side, where Boulderclaw and Jaypaw were already trying to tend to her. Boulderclaw saw his smallest son approaching, and nudged Jaypaw out of the way, much to the young tom's displeasure.

Ravenpaw crouched by Blososmpaw, watching her for movement. Yes! Her side was slowly moving up and down, though it was with sharp breaths. A light trail of blood came from her pale muzzle, and her eyes were closed. He nudged her cheek, and she groaned, though she didn't open her eyes. He pushed her again, needing to see her gaze up close, and she finally opened them slightly.

He was terrified by the pale, bloodshot look in her gaze. Her eyes loosely tracked his. "I... I can't see..." she whispered.

"Completely? Or is it just blurry?" Ravenpaw rushed. Blossompaw blinked, seemingly surprised by the questions. She didn't seem like herself.

"Blu...blurry..." Blossompaw's eyes went weak and she leaned her head back. But her sides were still moving, showing she was alive.

Ravenpaw forced himself out of his shock, knowing it was no time to get scared. "Boulderclaw, go back to camp and get Mossrain. Bring the strongest warriors in camp and get back here quick." It almost felt natural to be ordering around the senior warrior, a very different feeling than what he felt when he first started healing.

Boulderclaw thundered away on quick but quiet paws, and Ravenpaw leaned his ear down to his sister's chest, listening to her rough, ragged breathing. "Jaypaw, go to the river over there and grab those plants." He flicked his tail to the small supply of coltsfoot growing by the water's edge. "Bring it back to me then soak a ball of moss."

Jaypaw looked hesitant about leaving his sister, then realized he needed to trust Ravenpaw and raced for the small stream. Ravenpaw leaned over his sister and sniffed at her back where she

had slammed against the tree. He touched her spine with the gentlest touch he could, and she cried out in pain, her body curling in agony, which made her yowl in pain even more.

"Stay still, Blossompaw," Ravenpaw whispered desperately, feeling terror for his poor sister. He had heard stories of cats who had broken their spines and lost the use of their back legs, and he was terrified his sister would turn out the same. She was rude and didn't truly understand being a warrior yet, but she didn't deserve to live the rest of her life confined to a nest.

Jaypaw returned with the coltsfoot, and Ravenpaw instantly began to chew it into a pulp, barely noticing the sharp taste, and forced his sister's jaws open with a racing heart. She groaned and weakly tried to fight him away, but gave up and he spit the herb into her mouth, closing her jaws tight. He leaned down and licked her throat until she swallowed. A few moments later Jaypaw approached with soaking moss in his jaws.

"Let the water drip onto her mouth, she should react and try to drink it," Ravenpaw ordered, and once again gently touched his sister's spine. She groaned sucked in her breath, but didn't react anymore. He gently placed pressure more near her tail, and was incredibly glad when she whimpered in pain--at least her spine wasn't broken.

Ravenpaw watched as Blossompaw weakly licked at the water dripping down onto the side of her muzzle for what felt like moons before he smelled the familiar scent of his mentor and father. A moment later, they both appeared, followed by Oakcloud, Silverstrike, Maskdapple, and even Eagleclaw. Ravenpaw was curious why his mother hadn't come, but then remembered she was on patrol. Hopefully, Boulderclaw sent someone out to find her.

Mossrain ran forward and began sniffing the poor kit, then raised a paw to touch her spine, having the same fears as Ravenpaw. "She feels everything along her spine, even down by her tail. I don't think it's broken." Ravenpaw wished desperately to be correct. To his surprise, Mossrain withdrew his paw without even testing the cat's spine. He immediately believed in Ravenpaw's skills.

"If it's not broken it's likely fractured."

"Fractured?" Ravenpaw wasn't sure what the word meant, but it sounded bad.

"There may be a crack in her spine," he explained. "It can heal, but it will take some time." He noticed the coltsfoot remains on the ground, and nodded his approval. "Good call, she probably got the wind knocked out of her when she hit the tree. Coltsfoot would help clear her breathing. We need to get her back to camp so I can get a full look at her, and treat her with more herbs."

Oakcloud and Boulderclaw, with similar muscular body shapes, stepped forward to volunteer their service in carrying the poor apprentice. "Why are we all here?" Eagleclaw pointed her tail to the other members of the patrol. Mossrain looked at Ravenpaw, also curious about the young cat's thinking.

"The dog is likely running back to its Twolegs, what if they follow its trail back here? We can't move Blossompaw quickly, so we need protection."

"So I came out here to do nothing? Twolegs are too dumb to follow our trails!" Silverstrike lashed his tail, looking irritated. Ravenpaw instantly felt embarrassed about his fear of the dog, and was ashamed he took these warriors from their duties.

"Actually, I agree with Ravenpaw," Boulderclaw meowed, surprising his young son. "These Twolegs seem a little smarter than others, and their dogs are definitely smart enough to lead them back here. We'll have to make the patrols be a little more careful--the Twolegs will see one of their dogs injured and may try to find us."

Silverstrike snorted and looked away from his littermate.

"All right, we need to lift her up, but very carefully. Her back needs to stay straight." Mossrain instructed Boulderclaw and Oakcloud to crouch down, and he had Eagleclaw and Silverstrike help gently pull Blossompaw onto the backs of the two toms. The apprentice whimpered and groaned, her eyes still closed.

"Her vision is blurry," Ravenpaw meowed, having forgotten the important detail. "I think she hit her head. Will it get better?"

Mossrain looked overwhelmed. He looked small and scared and his ears flattened against his head. Ravenpaw could see the clear look in his eyes--*What would Goldenpool do?* He was barely older than an apprentice, after all, and obviously still relied on the golden tabby. What he would do after she died, Ravenpaw had no clue. Once again, he just wished his vision was wrong.

"If she rests, then yes, it likely will. But I need to get her back to camp first." He nodded and Boulderclaw and Oakcloud rose together and very slowly started forward. Jaypaw came forward and pressed against his brother, fur bristling.

"I brought her here..." Jaypaw whispered. "This is all my fault..."

Question #1: What's your opinion on the shorter chapters? Would you rather longer waits and longer chapters, or shorter chapters with less wait?

Question #2: What do you think will happen to Blossompaw?

Question #3: Do you think this incident will change how Blossompaw acts?

Chapter Eight

"Ravenpaw, fix up that moss into a nest! I need it flat so she can lay out." Mossrain mindlessly flicked his tail in the direction of a large pile of moss, freshly brought in from the hard working paw of Jaypaw. The black apprentice hurried over at his mentor's orders and began to spread it out. Fur brushed his side as Jaypaw came to work beside him, getting the work done much sooner.

Mossrain came back with jaws full of herbs--in his shock, Ravenpaw was suddenly unable to remember if he had learned them, despite his earlier calm--and directed Blossompaw to be set down on the bedding. Boulderclaw and Oakcloud gently lowered their bodies, and Eagleclaw and Maskdapple helped lay her down.

"Silverstrike, see if Snowfern has returned. If not, send an apprentice out to get her. She should be on the forest border to the moor of our territory, coming back home. Quickly!" Boulderclaw's tail was lashing and he forced himself to step back to give Mossrain room.

"Oakcloud, I need Goldenpool here."

"She needs to watch our kits!" the tom said before he could stop himself.

"You can do that! I need my mentor!" There was worry spiked in young Mossrain's voice, showing his youth, and Oakcloud's eyes shined with regret at arguing with the other tom and hurried off with his tail down. Boulderclaw swallowed, ears flattened, obviously discouraged by Mossrain's fear.

"She'll be okay, right?" Ravenpaw couldn't help but ask. Mossrain didn't even bother to try to answer.

"Eagleclaw, send two cats out to find a stick as long as a cat's back

that is as straight as possible. I need more moss, as well. Cobwebs, too, and as much bindweed as possible--ask Frostfall, she'll know where to find them. And I need it all as fast as possible."

Eagleclaw nodded and gestured for Maskdapple and Silverstrike, who both stood to attention. "Get your apprentices out searching for cobwebs, then assign any other apprentice you can find to get moss. Silverstrike, you take Frostfall to get the bindweed. I'll take Petalpaw to find the stick."

Maskdapple looked back at Mossrain with a longing gaze, desperately wanting to stay with her young son to help him through his stress, but after a moment she listened to her deputy and hurried off, her mate Silverstrike right at her paws, also having a small hesitation in his step. It was obvious Boulderclaw wasn't going anywhere, so Eagleclaw hadn't even tried. The worry in his gaze made Ravenpaw's chest burn, and he desperately wanted to help his poor father over his pain.

But his work as a medicine cat was more important.

"Ravenpaw, I need some celandine and comfrey roots. And a few daisy leaves!" he added quickly as his apprentice raced to the store. Ravenpaw found the celandine by its soft, calming scent, and the comfrey roots by their location. The daisy leaves were found by their placing, too, just a few herbs over from the roots.

He raced them back to his mentor, sat them down, and anxiously waited for more instructions. Mossrain was leaned over Blossompaw, softly licking at her back as if he was feeling for something underneath with his tongue. He seemed to find it, for he pulled away and touched it with a soft single claw. Blossompaw yowled and flinched and jerked her spine into a curl.

Boulderclaw made a move to come over but slowly forced himself back down with great difficulty. Suddenly, Goldenpool rushed into the den. Mossrain didn't look but obviously scented her, for he backed up just in time for the large queen to crouch down at the nest's edge. "She hit her back hard against a tree. She can still feel pain in her lower back, so I think it may have been a fracture. I think it was here--" he pointed to the spot that he had just touched,

near the middle of her back. "And she said she has a blurry vision. That's not from the spine injury, is it?" In this moment, looking small and scared with a flicking tail tip, Mossrain looked like an apprentice again.

"No. She likely hit her head," Goldenpool muttered, sniffing over her side. "We'll need a straight stick, cobwebs, bindweed, comfrey, celandine, and maybe some daisy leaves." Mossrain waited for her to finish with her list, wanting to see if he had forgotten anything. But he had been right.

"Eagleclaw already has cats on it, and the herbs are right here." Mossrain stepped back and sat back down again, waiting for directions.

"Chew. Chew." Goldenpool pushed the roots towards Mossrain and the daisy to Ravenpaw. The two toms instantly listened to their shared mentor and began to chew the roots, while she picked up the celandine. Her trained jaws finished quickly, and using her long, curled claws, she opened Blossompaw's mouth and spit the herb in. She closed the cat's muzzle and rubbed a paw on her throat, forcing her to swallow. The small cat winched mewled but held the herb down.

Goldenpool cleaned a front paw in the water then reached out for Ravenpaw's daisy. He passed it over spitting it onto her pad, and she leaned over Blossompaw and gently began rubbing it along her spine and hips. "Isn't daisy used for aching joints?" Ravenpaw finally asked, now having free jaws.

"Her muscles and bones will be very sore from this injury. We'll have to stock up on herbs like daisy and ragwort to keep her comfortable. Comfrey." She reached her paw out to Mossrain and he gave her the poultice. She spread it along the area Mossrain said was injured. Blossompaw mewled and cried in pain.

Boulderclaw finally couldn't handle sitting back and hurried forward to his daughter's face, giving her forehead a soft lick. "Don't worry, you'll be okay," he whispered like he was talking to a very young kit. His eyes were full of pain and worry.

Then there was a thundering of pawsteps and Snowfern rushed in, fur bristling and eyes wide. She cried out when she saw her kit sprawled out on her nest, and raced over to collapse by her mate's side. Jaypaw and Willowpaw followed in, both mewling in fear. After them, Stonecoat and Shadefur came to check on poor Blossompaw. Outside, Ravenpaw could smell the mingling smells of the whole Clan.

"I need this den cleared out!" Goldenpool snapped suddenly. "All cats except medicine cats and one parent need to get out. I need space." Boulderclaw and Snowfern looked at each other in fear, but then Boulderclaw licked his mate's cheek, tucked his head in her shoulder for a few moments, and stood up. He directed his four kits from the den, despite their complaints.

Goldenpool had Mossrain feed Blossompaw water when she left quickly to check on her kits, and a moment after she returned Eagleclaw came in with a stick, and Silverstrike with bindweed. Goldenpool sighed in relief and took them, straightening the stick against Blossompaw's spine then softly curling the bindweed around her body to keep it in place.

Soon, cobwebs were brought, and she used those to also keep the stick in place, not trusting the bindweed to stay. Then, she sat back, looking extremely tired. Snowfern looked up, eyes scared, then tucked her face closer to her daughter's. "Ravenpaw, poppy seeds," Goldenpool said in a tired voice.

Instantly, the apprentice, his muscles sore from his tense stance, jumped across the den and found a few of the seeds, and brought them back to Goldenpool wrapped in an oak leaf. She took two and put them in Blossompaw's mouth, forcing the kit to swallow them, then gave one to Snowfern. The she-cat looked faintly confused, then licked it up and curled up next to her daughter.

"I'm going to bring one to Boulderclaw, Jaypaw, and Willowpaw," Goldenpool meowed, standing.

"I'll bring them to them," Ravenpaw volunteered.

Goldenpool shook her head and put a poppy seed in front of him.

"You've been through a lot today, you need to rest just as much as your kin." Ravenpaw opened his mouth to argue, but then decided against it and took the seed, swallowed it, then went to his mother, curling up at her stomach. She purred weakly, curling closer, but still kept her tail wrapped around Blossompaw's neck.

"She'll be okay," Ravenpaw muttered to his mother, blinking softly. "I know it..."

Started this chapter today...Finished it in like an hour without any pauses. I really don't understand myself anymore. First it takes a month for a chapter, now a day? Writers' block, man.

Question #1: Your thoughts on this chapter?

Question #2: Your thoughts on all the characters in this chapter? (I.E. Mossrain, Goldenpool, Boulderclaw, Ravenpaw, Snowfern, Silverstrike, Eagleclaw, Oakcloud, etc.)

Chapter Nine

Ravenpaw was barely paying attention to the three young kits playing before him. The biggest kit, Alder, was struggling to pin Crow with his paws, while Ash maintained a small mossball. Sage was watching them with eagle eyes full of protection, while Bat was out hunting with Smoke and Flint. Creek was nearby, keeping a tiny silver and black tabby still with her paws.

Echo's sightless eyes shined with anger as she struggled to get free. "I wanna play!" the moon old kit cried.

"Echo, you will stay with Creek or you will go back into the den!" Sage snapped, and the kit muttered something but sat back with a huff, tail flicking.

"I could take her to the river--" Creek began, but Sage's look of absolute horror forced her to stop short.

"Never! She is much too small!" Sage hurried over to the pale gray tabby and took her kit by her scruff, bringing her over to her littermates and locking Echo under her chest.

"Much too blind, you mean," Echo muttered. Despite being a young kit and rather small, she seemed to be moons older than her littermates on the inside.

"You're not strong enough!" Sage told her firmly, giving her a fierce lick on her head. Echo ducked away with a tiny hiss and curled up in a ball, tail tip flicking her nose softly. She seemed like any other kit, but her mother's close eye forced her to stay hidden.

"Will Blossompaw be okay?" Ravenpaw mewed softly, looking over at adult-Echo, but the she-cat was staring forward at her young self with a sad green gaze. "How come your eyes are green? And not white, like when you were a kit?" Ravenpaw finally asked.

"Because I chose to have sight in death," Echo replied. "If I hadn't been blind, then I would've had green eyes." Her gaze sparkled with sad memories. Ravenpaw nodded numbly and watched the kits again.

"May I go?" he asked. "I enjoy these meetings, but I want to see my sister." Her injury had only been caused yesterday, and the events were still fresh in his mind. The dog stalking from the shadows, his sister clinging to it's muzzle in attempt to protect her littermates, the horrifying thud as she hit the tree, Boulderclaw appearing to save her--he swallowed and shut his eyes to cut the memories out.

"Of course," Echo responded. "Let StarClan walk your path."

Ravenpaw was a little frustrated with the she-cat, and was happy when she faded. He had begged for information on his dear sister's health, whether she would live to see herself become a warrior, but Echo had refused to answer any questions about the living world.

Ravenpaw blinked open his eyes softly, his jaws quickly parting into a large yawn that he struggled to fight back. He tiredly turned his head, upset to find his mother gone. He was still settled next to Blossompaw, but the place his mother had taken was gone, replied with a warm-blooded mouse that made his stomach rumble in hunger.

He guessed it was for himself, and rolled over, stretching knots from his spine and legs before neatly eating the piece of prey. After, he cleaned his muzzle with a paw and leaned close to Blossompaw, sniffing at her cheek, then her back. Her fur was slick with a poultice of comfrey roots along her back, with the stick still holding her spine straight to heal it.

Ravenpaw pulled back, his whispers brushing over her cheek, and her eyes twitched. He froze, staring intently at her face, and his heart lept for joy when her eyes began to peel open. Her green gaze was confused and dull.

She groaned softly, blinking very slowly, then her gaze tried to focus on Ravenpaw. "Rave...Ravenpaw...?" she murmured drosily. "Is that you?"

"It's me, Blossompaw, it's me," he whispered, curling closer to his poor sister. Her mew was so soft and quiet it sounded like a young kit's.

"I... I can't see right..." she muttered, and Ravenpaw's heart dropped once again. "Why can't I see...?"

"Just sleep, Blossompaw," Ravenpaw meowed, giving her a lick on her forehead like a mother would do, and the she-cat accepted his wishes and closed her eyes again.

"What did she say?" Ravenpaw jumped slightly at Mossrain's voice behind him, and he turned to see his mentor standing at the entrance to the den, herbs at his paws.

"She said she couldn't see right." He looked at his sister in worry then back at his mentor. "That will go away, right? She'll be able to see soon?"

"I hope so," Mossrain sighed and grabbed the herbs, putting the herbs in the store. "You should rest, there's nothing you can do now, and I'm sure your company is calming your sister, even when she's sleeping."

"But she hates me," Ravenpaw mewed. She had sounded nice when she had just woken, but he knew it was just from her fear--and her sacrifice in the Gathering Hollow had been for Jaypaw, not him.

"No, she doesn't," Mossrain meowed, coming over and sitting next to his apprentice, their fur brushing. "She is just confused on who she is. Give her time, and she will realize her mistakes. You have always been more mature than your littermates, Ravenpaw. Blossompaw is still a lost kit. Give her the patience you give to so many others." He touched his apprentice's cheek with his nose, then softly padded away and out of the den.

Ravenpaw looked after him sadly, then curled up and rested his nose under his tail tip. He wasn't feeling tired and was about to uncurl himself to work in the store when he heard pawsteps, and Acornstar's scent came to his nose. For some reason, he found himself tightening himself back up and controlling his breathing,

giving the illusion he was asleep.

He heard the she-cat's pawsteps come closer until she stopped at the side of the nest. "StarClan..." the leader whispered, "I know you are punishing me for my feelings. But why set it on this apprentice?" She sounded more sane than Ravenpaw had ever heard. "She is bad-tempered and chooses the wrong path, but that does not mean she should be forced to live in a nest. If I make this Clan free of my unloyal thoughts, will you allow her to follow her own path?"

Ravenpaw could feel the sadness waving from the she-cat. The regret was strong enough to make Ravenpaw feel like he would've fallen if he had been standing.

"My dear mate, why does StarClan punish me? Do they not realize the troubles I all ready carry with me? It is so hard to keep them all safe..." Her pawsteps faded as she left the den again, leaving a heavy weight in the room.

Ravenpaw struggled to get to his paws, his legs weak and shaking. He forced himself over to the storage and sat, taking in the deep scents of all the different herbs. He listed their names and uses to calm himself, then went through the herbs, straightening them and taking away dying parts that would be of no or little use. He came across a large leaf wrapped around something very strong smelling in one of the deepest crack.

He began to reach a paw in, but a sharp mew of warning came from the entrance. He looked over quickly to see Mossrain had returned and was padding quickly over. "Don't! I completely forgot about those." He came over to the crack and grabbed a stick from the ground with his teeth. He angled it into the hole and used it to pull out the wrapped leaf. Once it was at the very edge of the crack, he dropped the stick and rolled the leaf wrap into a paw using the other.

He let it gently fall onto the ground and unwrapped it with careful claws, revealing a few bright red berries with dark jagged leaves. "These are deathberries," Mossrain explained softly, eyes sparked with worry.

"Deathberries?" Ravenpaw hadn't heard of them, but just their name terrified him.

"They are very posionous," Mossrain meowed, folding the leaf once again and using some bindweed to tie it together, then he gently lifted it back up into its crack and once again used the stick to push them back inside. "Even touching them can hurt you. Leave that crack alone, and the berries. If you ever see some in the forest, come back and tell me or a senior warrior immediately so we can get rid of them. They are too dangerous to have anywhere in the territory."

Ravenpaw nodded his understanding and his mentor padded to Blossompaw, sniffing her cheek then her back before promtly leaving the den, likely to go searching for more herbs, as he had been doing a lot recently. Ravenpaw went back to organizing the store, discarding a few dead leaves and shriveled berries.

When he finished, he went to the cobwebs and untangled them, making them easier and quicker to use, but that job was finished quickly. Sighing, he got up from the store and went into the farthest cave, the cool air whispering into his fur and sending shivers down his spine.

He ventured down the small pathway of stone until it opened up into a larger cave. After a few moments, his eyes adjusted, and he made out the gleam of cobwebs hiding in corners of the den. After covering his paw with them, he put them with the rest then licked up some water from the small pool.

He was incredibly bored, and still rather hungry. But he didn't want to leave Blossompaw. So he ignored his grumbling stomach and went to the nests that he and Mossrain slept in. He started picking through the moss, finding the old pieces that would be uncomfortable and throwing them to the side. But he had cleaned them recently, and only took a few minutes.

He went to a pile of dry moss in the corner and grabbed some, bringing them back to the nests and spreading the scraps out evenly. He grabbed all the old pieces and put them in the pile of old herbs, deciding he could bring them out to the dirt-place later on.

His chores must've taken longer than he thought, because Mossrain entered the den with new herbs in his jaws.

He hurried them to the store and fit them into a small crevice, then meowed while looking around, "the den looks great!"

Ravenpaw figured his mentor had ignored the pile of old herbs and moss. "It was nothing, really. It doesn't look that good." He felt a little embarrassed at his mentor's praise--it was his duty, afterall.

"Nonsense!" Mossrain denied. "It looks wonderful. Why don't you take those old supplies out then grab something to eat. That mouse was small, and likely didn't feed you. And I want you to keep your strength up! I'll watch Blossompaw, and I'll probably fix up the stick on her back and add some more herbs to help her spine. If you want, after you eat you can come back and I can tell you a story or two to pass the time. I have a great one about Pebblepeak taking me out hunting when we were apprentices, or maybe something older, I know some things about Goldenpool's past! Oh, and some great old injuries we both healed. That reminds me of this one time--oh, goodbye, Ravenpaw, talk to you later!"

Ravenpaw waved his tail nervously goodbye as he left the den, feeling bad for leaving his mentor in the middle of his speech, but he wasn't feeling up to listening. While his mentor was talking, he had grabbed the pile of herbs and moss and brought it out of the den, heading for the moorland entrance, not paying much attention to the other cats in the clearing.

Ravenpaw jumped down the rocks until he reached the soft grass. He padded to the edge of the tall cliff and along the edge until he found the heavy underbrush that had a small entrance for the dirt-place. He padded in and dropped the old moss and herbs, then decided to quickly make dirt before leaving and heading back up to camp.

He entered with a tiny hop in his step, but when he reached the top and looked around he saw his Clan in silent turmoil. A few apprentices were huddled near their den with wide eyes and bristling fur, obviously terrified by Blossompaw's encounter and injury; Russetdawn was guarding the moor entrance with a stiff

back, searching the open grassland for danger; Silverstrike sat at the forest entrance with a similar pose to the red she-cat; Frostfall sat on the Rock Pile with her ears perked; Oakcloud sat outside the nursery with a protective gaze; and Pebblepeak worked near him on strengthing the brambles to protect the kits.

Russetdawn meowed a tense greeting, and Ravenpaw looked over to see a patrol entering the camp. It was led by Eagleclaw, who was followed by Grayblaze, Boulderclaw, and Foxpounce. "Did you find the Twolegs?" Frostfall asked, jumping from the Rock Pile.

Silverstrike looked over from his guarding spot with ears perked, listening in on the conversation while still flicking his gaze to the moor. Oakcloud left the nursery after a quick murmur inside then hurried to the patrol. "Any sign of more dogs? They're not near camp, are they?"

Eagleclaw looked a little frustrated by all the questions, but, after taking a breath, began answering. "Yes, we found the Twolegs. Only three. Two were still at where they found the body, while another was at the Gathering Hollow. It seemed to be looking where the dog was injured--it's blood was everywhere, after all; we didn't see or smell any dogs; and no, the closest to camp they are is at the Gathering Hollow. We should be fine."

Oakcloud dug his claws against the ground. "I hate this!" he hissed, sounding scared. "Feeling like prey in my own territory! If they stay here, we'll starve before leaf-bare even comes!"

Ravenpaw cast a glance to the fresh-kill pile, and was actually surprised to see it was almost empty--he hadn't even realized the lack of prey, being so distracted as a medicine cat. He didn't really pay attention to how much prey was brought from the hunting patrols; he had seen it as not his problem. But he should've realized how wrong he was.

"Let me talk to Acornstar, and we'll decide a plan," Eagleclaw meowed.

"No!" Grayblaze growled, much to the surprise of all the cats in the clearing. A hunting patrol had just returned from the moorland

entrance, consisting of Snowfern, Stonecoat, and Shadefur--they only carried one rabbit.

"What do you mean 'no'?" Eagleclaw turned to the tom.

"Acornstar is barely even leading this Clan!" Grayblaze growled. "She does nothing but hide in that cave and screech at apprentices! She won't do anything to help this problem--we need to take care of it ourselves! I say we attack!"

"She is our leader," Eagleclaw hissed, fur beginning to bristle, "and we will listen to her commands! If she says we will run and hide then we will run and hide! If she says we will fight then we will fight--but we do nothing about this problem until she gives is the order. Do you understand that, Grayblaze?"

Grayblaze's muzzle curled back, showing his gleaming teeth in an obvious challenge.

"Great StarClan, Grayblaze, stop it!" Boulderclaw hissed, shoving his brother out of the way of the deputy. "Get a hold of yourself! We have enough problems to deal with without you too fighting."

The gray tom growled a warning to his brother, but then stalked off, tail lashing. "This won't end until we fight! We have to show them this is our territory."

"Only if Acornstar says so!" Eagleclaw growled after him, then turned and went to her leader's den, tail waving through the air. Ravenpaw felt nervous about listening to the conversation, though he felt a little better when he noticed every cat in the clearing was also listening in.

After a few moments of silence, Oakcloud meowed, "should we send out patrols?"

Boulderclaw shook his head. "Acornstar will likely call a meeting."

"Though we should get patrols ready for later--Eagleclaw has been busy today," Silverstrike meowed, padding up. "As Oakcloud said earlier, we're running low on prey. And if Acornstar does decide to fight for our territory, we'll need prey to strengthen ourselves."

"Knowing her, she'll likely choose fighting," Frostfall meowed, her tail flicking back and forth with fear.

"So we'll also need battle practice," Silverstrike finished.

"We can do that in the clearing, as long as we stay away from the edge." Boulderclaw flicked his tail to the dangerous side of the clearing that dropped far to the ground below.

"Foxpounce, Pebblepeak, you two practice a bit with the apprentices," Silverstrike called.

Foxpounce meowed his agreement and flicked his tail towards the apprentices' den, and the apprentices in camp--Brightpaw, Featherpaw, Flamepaw, and Petalpaw--all got up to follow him to an open place near the warriors' den.

"Russetdawn, once Acornstar makes a decision, I want you to take Frostfall, Pebblepeak, and Oakcloud out hunting," Boulderclaw meowed. The ginger-brown she-cat gave a quick nod and looked at the two other patrol members, waiting for both of them to nod in understanding.

"Ravenpaw!" The apprentice looked up when his name was called. Silverstrike looked over at him with a kind but sharp gaze. "Please go get Mossrain out here. He'll need to be ready for Acornstar's meeting."

The small apprentice nodded nervously and hurried to his den, slipping inside. He looked around--his sister was in her nest still--but his mentor was not to be seen, though his scent was fresh in the air. He called out the older tom's name, and he appeared a moment later from the back den, eyes curious.

"Is something wrong?" Mossrain asked.

"Eagleclaw's patrol found Twolegs in the Gathering Hollow. She's going to talk to Acornstar to make a plan. A few cats want to fight them off."

Mossrain snorted, curling his claws. "Of course they do! Acornstar will likely agree to a fight in some degree. We'll need to get herbs

and nests ready. I'll need some apprentices to go out moss hunting for me. You need to stay here and help me set up the moss we already have."

"I'll tell Silverstrike," Ravenpaw meowed, dipping his head in respect, then hurrying from the den. While he was inside, two patrols had returned--one a hunting patrol made up of Maskdapple, Firepaw, Stonecoat, and Shadefur, and the other Snowfern, Thorntail, Willowpaw, and Jaypaw. Every apprentice and warrior in the Clan was in the camp.

Silverstrike was explaining the situation to the patrols, though Snowfern was slowly moving away, and she took Ravenpaw's appearance as an excuse to hurry to the medicine cat's den. "How's Blossompaw?" she asked, pressing her muzzle against Ravenpaw's in a swift moment of affection.

"Sleeping. She seems better," Ravenpaw answered, and Snowfern purred weakly then hurried inside. Ravenpaw headed over to Silverstrike. The tom turned his head, scenting the medicine cat apprentice, and looked curious.

"What did Mossrain say?" he asked, tail flicking.

"He thinks Acornstar will choose to fight the Twolegs. He's getting herbs ready, but he'll need nests for moss."

Silverstrike nodded, and looked over the Clan, gathered anxiously and watching Ravenpaw with aspiration. They trusted him as a medicine cat, no matter how young he was. He felt fear travel down his pelt.

Murmurs went around the camp quickly as Eagleclaw appeared from her mother's den, soon followed by the proud leader, who went to the Rock Pile with a high head and leaped up. She turned to face her Clan, who had all ready piled forward. But still, she called the summons:

"Let all cats able to hunt for their Clan come to me for a Clan meeting!"

It seemed the words did have some affect, for Snowfern and Mossrain appeared from the medicine cat's den, and Goldenpool's head peeked out from the nursery, her eyes wide with fear. She was obviously remembering the accident that had caused the death of her mother when she was young. She was probably scared the same would happen to her.

What if she knew it would? Ravenpaw thought sadly, remembering the many visions of the she-cat's early passing. His most recent vision, caused when he touched little Stormkit's nose, had revealed her mourning the death of her mother the night before her apprenticeship.

"Warriors of EchoClan!" Acornstar's voice was cold and harsh, echoing through the air like lightning. "These Twolegs are plaguing our forest, scaring our prey and injuring our cats! I will not stand for it anymore! Today, we will end this. We will not attack the Twolegs straight out, but instead stalk them and attack their dogs until they retreat. We will trick them and scare them until they leave us alone."

A few cats let out murmurs of disagreement, and Acornstar's eyes flashed with anger.

"Do you not trust my orders?" she growled. "Are you scared of those creatures? Will you be like mice hiding in their burrow, or cats, strong and powerful, willing to face their challenges head on?" she yowled.

This time, those still unsure stayed quiet, while many cats cried out in agreement, letting their voices join together in the air.

"We are EchoClan!" Acornstar called, stomping a paw onto the ground. "We are strong! We can survive anything that StarClan may throw at us! We will survive, and we will show these Twolegs that we are not to be messed with!"

This cat that stood on the Rock Pile, head high, eyes shining with pride at her cats, was so different than the broken mess that had snuck quietly into the medicine cat's den to pray too her dead mate. Perhaps, this challenge would get her into better shape--into a

better mind.

"EchoClan!" Silverstrike yowled from the crowd. "EchoClan! EchoClan!"

Other cats joined him, from senior warriors to young apprentices, all voices raised in the chant. Ravenpaw could feel joy rising in his chest as he joined in, and he even heard the soft squeaking voices of Stormkit and her littermates from the entrance of the nursery joining in.

This was the Clan he would heal. This was the Clan he was proud of. This was his home.

Question #1: What are your thoughts on what Acornstar said in the medicine cat's den when she thought Ravenpaw was sleeping? *(if you can't remember exactly, she said "'StarClan...I know you are punishing me for my feelings. But why set it on this apprentice? She is bad-tempered and chooses the wrong path, but that does not mean she should be forced to live in a nest. If I make this Clan free of my unloyal thoughts, will you allow her to follow her own path?'")*

Question #2: What are your thoughts on the entirety of EchoClan, and the individual warriors? (i.e. their all together personality/ traits/feelings/actions)

Chapter Ten

Jaypaw was breathing heavy in the commotion of the Clan getting ready for battle. Acornstar had announced after her speech that they would attack right away, and possibly even drag the battle on for days until they left.

Eagleclaw was putting cats into different groups for the attack. "Pebblepeak, I want you to take Frostfall and Willowpaw hunting--the injured cats will need the strength. Thorntail, you will take Flamepaw and Firepaw looking for moss for Mossrain."

The two patrols nodded and headed out. Thorntail looked mad he wasn't going to be fighting yet and was setting out on an apprentice's job, but he set out anyways with the two apprentices.

"Silverstrike, you'll lead the second battle patrol," Eagleclaw meowed when the two patrols left. "I want you to take Snowfern, Featherpaw, Stonecoat, and Shadefur."

The silver tom nodded and flicked his tail for the named cats to come to him, and they gathered together.

Eagleclaw nodded to them. "Oakcloud, you will lead Grayblaze, Brightpaw, and Russetdawn in the third patrol. I will lead the first with Boulderclaw, Foxpounce, Maskdapple, Petalpaw, and Jaypaw--Foxpounce, is your apprentice ready to fight in this battle?"

Jaypaw looked at his mentor in excitement, tail rising, and the ginger tabby stared at him for a long moment with his yellow gaze, before finally looking at his deputy and meowing, "yes, I believe he is."

Eagleclaw nodded in pride. "Good. Mossrain, when the patrols return, tell them to stay here and guard the camp," the she-cat added over to the medicine cat at the entrance to his den. He nodded, his tail flicking over Ravenpaw's back, and Jaypaw could

see the fear in his brother's eyes as they locked gazes.

As the Clan rose to get ready to leave, Jaypaw raced over to his brother and went to touch noses with him, but he flinched away. Jaypaw was sad for a moment, but then Ravenpaw pressed his cheek and muzzle against his face. "Good luck. Please be safe," Ravenpaw whispered, "I don't want you hurt, too."

Jaypaw pulled back with a sad expression in his eyes. "I promise I'll be okay. Foxpounce will watch my back." He looked back at his mentor, and he saw the ginger tabby nod, then he turned back to his brother. "Take care of Blossompaw--let her know we're doing this for her. So no cat will ever be injured like that again by one of these dogs."

Ravenpaw's eyes gleamed with sadness. "You can tell her yourself when you get back."

Jaypaw rested his muzzle in his brother's neck for a moment, but when Foxpounce called for him, he forced himself away and hurried for his patrol's side. He was glad he was in the same patrol as Boulderclaw, so he was able to move close to the large cat's side and hide in his thick fur.

Boulderclaw's tongue rasped over his ear. "Just stay close to me or Foxpounce." The young tom nodded and moved a little closer to his experienced father. The groups began heading for the forest entrance of the camp, but a call behind them made them stop.

Acornstar was standing on her rock, looking proud, though there was something hidden in her eyes. "Good luck, warriors. Fight strong, and fight safe. EchoClan shall celebrate their victory when you return."

She seemed very sure of her warriors, and it inspired confidence in Jaypaw. He followed his mentor with his muscles tensed, though he looked out at the camp as the patrols left. It looked very empty--he had seen it clear of cats before, but now it just seemed sad and deserted of life.

Jaypaw followed his patrol, making sure to stick close to the

members, though he continued to glance to his side, where he wished Blossompaw could walk. He had imagined since they were kits going into battle with all his littermates beside him--even Ravenpaw, before he became a medicine cat. But now, he was going in alone, with only his father and mentor there to protect him.

As they traveled through the forest towards where the dead Twoleg had been found, Petalpaw came over from Eagleclaw's side and walked next to the younger apprentice.

"When you're in battle, just remain calm. Your enemy will sense your fear and use it against you. Think of the cats you're protecting--Goldenpool and her kits, Mossrain and Ravenpaw."

Jaypaw looked over at his friend. "Who do you think of in battle to stay calm?" he asked.

Petalpaw cast his gaze to the tortoiseshell pelt of his sister. "Brightpaw. And Willowpaw." His ears flicked in embarrassment, and he looked away. Jaypaw was just as embarrassed, looking at his paws, but they were over their moment soon enough, when Eagleclaw raised her tail for silence, and all cats tensed and slid their claws out, fur bristling in excitement.

"We're approaching where the Twolegs are usually at. Oakcloud, your patrol will stay on the ground. Silverstrike and I will lead our patrols into the trees. I want to see the situation and decide then. We may all attack together, or apart. Jaypaw will run messages to both your groups when I decide on a plan."

The young cat looked up at that, fear clouded his gaze, but also excitement. His deputy was trusting him to get the message across of how they would protect their Clan. He was only seven moons old, but trusted. Then he realized he was also the youngest cat there, and the smallest. That killed his pride a little bit, but he did his best to push it away.

The two patrol members nodded, and while Oakcloud led his team into the undergrowth, Eagleclaw and Silverstrike climbed the thick wood trunks of the forest trees. Both Foxpounce and Boulderclaw waited for Jaypaw to go up first.

"Make sure to move slow and safe," Foxpounce told him, and Boulderclaw nodded in agreement, looking proud of his old apprentice. Jaypaw nodded and hooked his claws into the trees, climbing the bark until he made it to where Petalpaw was waiting for him. Eagleclaw and Maskdapple were farther along the tree, scanning the small clearing where the Twolegs had flattened the undergrowth.

Twoleg items were scattered around the clearing, with a small group of Twolegs leaned over where Jaypaw remembered the body used to be. Nearby, tied to a tree, were three large, terrifying dogs, their monsterous sizes as big as the dog that had attacked them in the Gather Hollow.

Then Jaypaw saw the face of one of the dogs. It was clawed and scratched around the eyes, showing bright pink flesh underneath. Jaypaw recognized it as the dog that had violently injured his sister. "When we attack the dogs, I want to fight that one," Jaypaw hissed, flicking his tail at the large male.

Eagleclaw followed his gaze, and understanding glowed in her eyes. "Is that the one who hurt Blossompaw?" she asked, and he nodded. Her claws dug into the bark and she growled, "I'll take some of his fur to line my nest."

Suddenly, one of the other dogs raised their head. It smelled like a female, with a lean body and a dark face. Her lips pulled back into a snarl, revealing large, sharp teeth. Her eyes were pointed towards the undergrowth where Jaypaw could see the gleam of Brightpaw's glowing tortoiseshell pelt.

The Twolegs looked up, and followed the dog's gaze. One held up a strange shiny back object in his hand, and yelled something that Jaypaw couldn't understand. It had its arms straight out, front paws curled around the object. It yelled again, something that sounded like a warning.

He said something a little quieter to the Twoleg beside him, and it went to the dogs, grabbing the female around the neck. The first Twoleg called something again to the underbrush, then made a quick signal with a paw to the second Twoleg.

Eagleclaw realized what was happening a moment before it did. She jumped to the end of the branch, screeching, "Oakcloud, run!" But it was too late. The Twoleg released the dog from the vine-like thing that was holding it back, and it launched forward like lightning.

The other two dogs pulled at their restraints and cried out in anger. As the dog dove into the bush, Jaypaw saw Oakcloud shoving Brightpaw up a tree before following. Grayblaze ran from the underbrush, but then turned and hissed in anger, launching at the dog.

It didn't flinch, but instantly snapped its jaws at the warrior. But he managed to jump away right before the teeth made contact with his skin, though it did tear out a bunch of fur. The dog spit the fur onto the ground then jumped forward again. Grayblaze rose onto his back paws to meet it.

It ran right into him, clasping its jaws around his stomach, and the tom screeched in pain, whithering in its strong grasp. Boulderclaw let out yowl of terror for his brother, and there was a loud crash of thunder and a brust of hot air right next to Jaypaw's ear.

He looked quickly to the clearing, where he saw one of the Twolegs holding its paws towards him, holding something in its paws like the first. The Twoleg appeared, going to the other and slapping the object from his hands, then called for the dog attacking Jaypaw's kin.

He looked quickly at the fight, and saw Grayblaze had been thrown much like Blossompaw had been, but not as far and he was softened by some ferns. Now, the dog was facing Russetdawn with a growl. The Twoleg called again, hurrying to the underbrush, but the dog still ignored it.

It launched itself at Russetdawn, and the she-cat hissed and leaped at its face, using the same move Boulderclaw had on the other dog when Blossompaw was injured. But this dog was smarter--it jumped back with the red cat still clinging to its face and brought up a huge paw, slapping the she-cat away.

Featherpaw mewled in fear for her mother from the other tree,

while Foxpounce tensed to jump down and attack before the dog could injure his dear mate. Jaypaw expected Eagleclaw to make him stop, but instead she cried, "attack!" and launched from the tree. But she didn't go for the dog attacking her Clanmate. It was then Jaypaw noticed the biggest dog, the scarred one, had broken free and was racing for the battle.

Jaypaw swallowed his fear as he watched his deputy bravely land on the dog's back and dig her claws into its back. Petalpaw yowled a warrior's cry and took off from the tree, followed by Silverstrike from the other. Petalpaw landed on the dog's head, almost sliding off, while Silverstrike hit the ground and launched for its back legs.

The Twolegs yelled but kept back, and one went quickly towards the last dog, desperately trying to get free. Jaypaw hissed and pressed his claws into the tree, bunching his muscles and taking off from the tree. He practically flew across the clearing, landing on the Twoleg's chest. He dug his claws in, but it didn't seem to hurt the Twoleg. There was a protective covering, like tightly-packed moss. The Twoleg grabbed at his neck and tried to pull him off, but he growled and slashed its face with his claws.

Suddenly, it cried and collapsed, allowing Jaypaw to leap away, out of the reach of the nearby dog. Boulderclaw had attacked the Twoleg's legs, forcing it to fall. The last Twoleg looked overwhelmed, looking at the undergrowth where the she-dog and his friend had disappeared, to the big scarred dog being attacked by cats, to his friend on the ground.

Then it raised the object in its hands, and directed it at Boulderclaw. Jaypaw instantly knew the thing could seriously injure his father, by the way the Twoleg held it, and he launched forward, crying a warning. He rammed into Boulderclaw's side, knocking him out of the way just as a clap of thunder came from the small object and a blast of quick wind ruffled Jaypaw's fur.

The Twoleg from the bushes appeared, dragging the female dog with him, with its jaws covered in blood. It growled and tugged but followed him. He saw the danger the other dog and his friend was in, but quickly went to the tree and tied the dog back up, before going to his downed friend, yelling with his hands in the air.

"Get away!" Boulderclaw growled to his son, and they hurried away together, racing into the undergrowth.

The Twoleg yelled to his companion and they both hurried forward towards where Eagleclaw was leading the attack on the biggest dog. "Eagleclaw! Watch out!" Boulderclaw screeched.

The she-cat saw the Twolegs coming and called a quick retreat. The cats attacking with her instantly took to the trees, followed by Boulderclaw and Jaypaw. Snowfern, Stonecoat, and Shadefur, who had joined the attack, crowded next to the two toms as they came up to the thick branch.

"Thank StarClan you're okay!" Snowfern cried, licking Jaypaw's forehead then her mate's.

The cats looked down into the clearing to see the Twolegs tying their dogs to themselves and taking them to the trees, towards the Old Thunderpath. The Twoleg who seemed to be the leader looked back at the cats crouched in the trees, and raised a paw, saying something Jaypaw couldn't understand.

But he almost sensed... Regret?

"Who's injured?" Eagleclaw finally snapped from her faze of staring at the disappearing Twolegs.

"Down here!" Came Foxpounce's scared meow. All the cats hurried down from their tree and raced over.

Laying where the first dog had attacked in the undergrowth, surrounded by blood and ripped fur, was Russetdawn, lying with a deep wound down her side and a messy bite mark on her neck. Her eyes were glazed with pain and she was breathing heavy, with her fur slick from blood.

"Eagleclaw, we need to get her back to camp!" Foxpounce cried to his deputy, looking at his mate with terror in his eyes.

"Brightpaw, get Mossrain--now!" Eagleclaw snapped, then hurried to Foxpounce's side, dropping next to Russetdawn as Brightpaw raced off through the forest, paws pounding. Featherpaw mewled in fear,

fur standing on end, and Jaypaw hurried to her side, pressing against her.

"Don't worry," he meowed, licking her ear, "she'll be all right." She shivered, looking at her paws. Jaypaw watched his deputy grab fallen leaves from the ground and stuff them against the bleeding stomach wound on her warrior.

"Who's injured?" Boulderclaw meowed, looking over the gathered cats.

"I wrenched my shoulder jumping from the tree, I think," Silverstrike meowed, holding up one paw with a pained look, though his focus was completely on Russetdawn. Maskdapple was pressed against him, the whites of her fur stained with blood.

"I have a bitemark on my haunches, but it's not that bad," despite the tortoiseshell's brave words, she looked like she was going to fall any moment, and was obviously using her mate to steady herself.

"I got a few scratches," Petalpaw meowed quickly. "But I'm fine. What can I do to help?"

"Go find cobwebs," Boulderclaw told him, and the tortoiseshell shot off.

"I only have a torn ear," Shadefur meowed. "I know what goldenrod looks like, I think there's some around here." The gray tom didn't wait for an answer and hurried off.

"I'll help him!" Stonecoat, who had been lying down, struggled to his paws, revealing a long, bleeding wound on one foreleg.

"No, you'll stay here," Boulderclaw answered, and his son sighed and got back down. Snowfern hurried to him, mewling in fear. She seemed uninjured except for a few small scratches that had all ready stopped bleeding, to Jaypaw's relief, though he was now also worried for his poor older brother. "Featherpaw? Oakcloud?" he looked at the brown warrior.

"I'm fine," Featherpaw replied quietly, despite bleeding from her tail and cheek.

"I got bit protecting Grayblaze," he meowed, holding one leg up, and Jaypaw saw heavy trails of blood soaking the fur on his shoulder.

"Grayblaze!" Boulderclaw seemed to sense great regret at having forgotten about his brother. "Where is he?"

"Over there, I think!" Jaypaw quickly looked to where he had seen Grayblaze fall into the ferns earlier, and caught a glance of his kin's messy gray fur.

"Grayblaze!" Boulderclaw raced to his brother's side. Jaypaw hurried after him, getting to his side to see his father's brother laying still, covered in blood from a wound in his stomach. "Grayblaze!" Boulderclaw nudged his shoulder.

The tom's eyes opened slightly and slowly, gaze dull. "Hm? Did we win?" he asked huskly.

"Thank StarClan!" Boulderclaw ignored his brother's question, pressing his nose into the other tom's fur.

"Get off!" Grayblaze grumbled, forcing himself to his stomach, despite his many wounds, and one of his back paws being twisted at an awkward angle. "Why thank StarClan? We did the fighting, not the stars."

"Grayblaze, we are alive because StarClan watches over us," Boulderclaw said tightly, tail flicking softly.

Grayblaze snorted. "Nothing but tales for kits!" he growled, getting heavily to his paws and limping unsteadily away.

The fur on Jaypaw's spine bristled. Did Grayblaze truly not believe in StarClan? How could that even be possible? All Clan cats, ever since they were tiny kits, were taught about their warrior ancestors, watching over their every step, helping them follow their true path.

What scared the young apprentice even more was that his father did not look surprised, just upset. He sighed and followed his brother, touching his son's shoulder with his tail, but he did not say anything. Mewling, Jaypaw quickly followed.

As they made it back to the other cats, Jaypaw went closer to Russetdawn, seeing her side continue to jut up and down unevenly, her breaths in ragged gasps--he thought she was moments from StarClan.

Suddenly, he heard fast approaching paws, and looked to see Brightpaw suddenly burst from the undergrowth, quickly followed by Mossrain, holding a large leaf wrap in his jaws. He immediately raced to Russetdawn, dropping down by her side.

The leaf wrap was dropped and unfolded, revealing some herbs and leaves. Mossrain grabbed some of the herbs in his jaws and quickly began chewing, while sniffing the she-cat's bloody side. "I'll need more goldenrod," he said through his chewing, mostly to himself.

"Shadefur is getting some, and Petalpaw is getting cobwebs," Eagleclaw replied, moving farther from Russetdawn. "Everyone, give him room."

"Where's Ravenpaw?" Jaypaw couldn't help but ask, worried why his brother hadn't come to help.

"Taking care of Blossompaw and getting herbs ready," Mossrain replied instantly.

Jaypaw licked his jaws fearfully.

"We need to get Russetdawn back to camp," Mossrain said suddenly.

"Shadefur has not returned yet!" Eagleclaw meowed quickly, stepping forward with a heavy limp. "He has goldenrod to help her, and surely she can't move?"

"I must get her back to camp, to all my supplies!" Mossrain snapped, teeth showing for a moment. "She won't survive unless I can use all my abilities to heal her. I need Goldenpool's help as well, but she cannot travel this far. Who is well enough to carry her?"

"I am!" Foxpounce meowed instantly, despite the heavy blood trailing from his shoulder and back.

"No, you're not," Mossrain growled fiercely. "I will not injure any

more of my warriors."

"I am all right to help," Boulderclaw meowed, moving forward toward the younger tom. Mossrain gave him a very swift look over then nodded.

"Who else?"

"I can," Snowfern meowed, "and Shadefur, once he returns."

"I'm here." The gray tom suddenly appeared, his jaws full of leaves.

"Give the goldenrod to someone else and help carry Russetdawn back."

"I need some help, here!" Grayblaze growled. "I can't return on my own."

Mossrain looked at the tom with surprise. "Yes, yes, of course. Boulderclaw, you will help your brother. Snowfern, Shadefur, help Russetdawn."

The cats nodded and hurried to the two injured cats. Boulderclaw helped up his brother and started towards the camp, while Snowfern and her son both tucked themselves under Russetdawn. With Mossrain's help, they raised themselves and very slowly started forward.

Russetdawn groaned and whimpered, claws curling. Foxpounce mewled like a kit and hurried to stay by her side, while Featherpaw pressed into his fur. Jaypaw stayed close to his father, trying to ignore the grunts of pain coming from his Clanmates, with the strong smell of blood filling his scent glands.

Mossrain kept pace with Russetdawn, constantly sniffing at her before moving away to let Snowfern and Shadefur walk easier. He slowed so they moved ahead then went to Grayblaze, sniffing his shoulder. The tom grumbled something under his breath and leaned away, farther into his brother.

Mossrain snorted, tail lashing, and went to Jaypaw's side. "Are you hurt? Any scratches or pains?"

"A Twoleg grabbed at my spine fur," Jaypaw admitted, still able to feel its paws gripping his skin and pulling it from him, twisting his pelt in its grasp.

"Let me know if it's bothering you tomorrow," Mossrain meowed, then moved over to Featherpaw to talk to her softly. She had her head down, and muttered a quiet reply to a question Jaypaw couldn't hear. Mossrain dipped his head and continued on to Maskdapple, then to Eagleclaw.

Jaypaw's legs began to ache and burn, and he suddenly realized the pain in his claws from digging them into the Twoleg's protected chest. His muscles were sore from jumping from the tree, and from walking at the slow but forced pace back to camp. Mossrain obviously wanted to hurry, continuing to move ahead, then forced himself to slow. He wanted to get his Clanmates home as soon as possible.

Jaypaw silently wondered if Russetdawn would make it all the way back to camp and through the difficult process of healing. He prayed to StarClan for her safety and the safety of the rest of the EchoClan cats.

Question #1: What were your thoughts of the battle?

Question #2: What do you think of what the Twolegs did in and after the battle? What do you think their actions meant?

Question #3: Do you think the Twolegs will return?

Question #4: Do you think any cats will die from this encounter? (Russetdawn and or Grayblaze)

Chapter Eleven

Ravenpaw paced restlessly in the medicine cat's den as he waited for the return of the battle patrols, anxious at the thought of his kin being injured. He feared that his brother would come back barely alive, and he cursed Brightpaw for not answering his plea of whether his parents and brothers were well.

By the sound of it, only Russetdawn was direly injured, though it was impossible to know until they returned since Brightpaw had been so quick in explaining the situation. Ravenpaw felt a quick flash of anger at his mentor for making him stay behind, but it faded fast as he remembered how much he had to do to get the den ready.

He looked over at the corner of the den, where he had put together many different nests and flat layers of moss for injured warriors and apprentices, with the water pool not far in case they needed something to drink. Nearby, all sorts of healing herbs layout, ready for use--a small pile of burnet for strength any weak cats; coltsfoot for shortness of breath in case a cat got scared; catchweed to stop poultices from being rubbed off; comfrey roots for wounds; dock to soothe scratches; a large pile of dry oak to stop infections before they came; goldenrod to heal; and marigold for injuries as well.

Mossrain had set out all the herbs and told Ravenpaw about them earlier in the day--he had barely remembered burnet, catchweed, and dry oak before Mossrain brought them out. Ravenpaw had looked through the piles many times to remind himself of their scent, feel, and look so he could be quick to help Mossrain.

He went over and looked at the large pile of cobwebs sat out, then nosed the moss balls next to the pool of water farther from the nests, not wanting them in the way, but also knowing they had to be ready for injured needing to drink or needing help cleaning their wounds.

He raised his head quickly when Blossompaw let out a weak mewl, and he hurried over to his sister, sniffing at her fur even though he didn't know how to tell if anything was wrong by scent yet--it was but a useless show of a skill he did not have. "Blossompaw?" he meowed softly.

If you think she's stirring, give her a small poppy seed, we don't want her waking while we're trying to work on sick cats, he remembered Mossrain telling him as he raced from the den with Brightpaw right in front of him.

Ravenpaw watched his sister for a few moments, but she seemed still, her breathing slow and even, so he left her alone. But he had barely stepped away before he heard commotion in the clearing. He hurried to the den entrance to see the battle patrols returning.

In the front was Shadefur and Snowfern, barely injured, carrying the limp body of Russetdawn. For a moment Ravenpaw was scared she was dead, but then he noticed the small movements of her sides. Boulderclaw followed them closely, helping Grayblaze walk by letting his brother lean on him--Grayblaze looked almost passed out, stomach soaked with dark blood.

Mossrain paced beside them, ordering, "get them both to my den, now." He let them go past, and Ravenpaw slipped out of the den for them to go past. Seeing his apprentice, the older medicine cat hurried over. "Go get Goldenpool and send her to my den. I want you out here and checking over all the cats. If the wounds can heal by themselves, have them go back to their dens and rest. If the wounds look remotely dangerous, send them into the den. Once you're done, come in and help the cats you know how to treat, and ask questions if you need to."

"Okay." Ravenpaw nodded, showing he understood.

Mossrain blinked at him then turned to the cats filing into the clearing, smelling strongly of blood. "Stay in the clearing until Ravenpaw directs you where to go." He looked back at his apprentice and added, "remember, it's better to scare away a mouse then welcome a badger--if you think a wound is bad, send them inside. We don't want infected wounds."

The gray tom whipped into the den, flicking Ravenpaw's shoulder with his tail tip. Ravenpaw watched fearfully after his mentor, scared by the trust the tom was placing in him, then he raced to the nursery, not wanting to waste any time.

He entered and was immediately enveloped with warmth and milk scent. Excited mewls came from one side of the den. "Ravenpaw!" Stormkit squealed, racing away from where she was gently playing with Willowpaw, who looked over at her brother.

"Hey, Stormkit!" Despite his hurry, Ravenpaw couldn't help but playfully bat at the kit for a moment, but he forced himself away and called to Goldenpool, who rested in her nest, "the patrols have returned, and Mossrain wants your help. Russetdawn and Grayblaze seem to be the most injured."

The golden tabby was already getting to her paws. "Kits, stay here with Willowpaw." She touched each of them on their heads then left the den quickly. Ravenpaw nodded to Willowpaw, touched Stormkit's forehead with his nose, taking in her sweet scent, then he followed the other she-cat.

They hurried across the clearing, but while Goldenpool disappeared into the medicine cat's den, Ravenpaw sat outside and looked at the cats gathered near. The first who came up was Featherpaw, looking past her friend with fear for her mother. Ravenpaw looked her over, finding only a scratched cheek and a blood-wet tail.

"You can head back to your den, but have someone lick your cheek and tail wound." Featherpaw looked a little upset she would not be next to her mother, and he added, "when I get the chance, I'll come and tell you how she's doing." The she-cat looked gratefully at him, touched his cheek with her nose, then hurried off.

"Ravenpaw!" Jaypaw came up, pressing himself against his brother's side with a relieved sigh."I'm so glad you're okay," Ravenpaw murmured, taking in his brother's smell for a moment, glad not to scent any blood.

"I don't have any injuries, I just wanted you to know I was safe." Jaypaw watched his brother for a moment before hurrying after

Featherpaw. Just then, the cats who had helped in Russetdawn and Grayblaze came out, and they joined the back of the gathered cats, waiting for a fair turn even though they didn't seem too injured.

"I got stepped on by a dog," Eagleclaw meowed as she limped up, "and one of my back pads hurts like a bee sting." She awkwardly raised it to Ravenpaw's vision, and he saw a slick cut over the thick pad.

"You go on in," Ravenpaw meowed. "Try to clean your wounds," he added as she passed.

"You're good at this," Eagleclaw praised.

Next was Maskdapple with a bloody bite on her haunches, and she seemed a little reluctant to enter the den. "There are other cats more injured than me," she said slowly.

"But you're more injured than others as well," Ravenpaw retorted kindly. The tortoiseshell snorted but forced herself into the den without any more complaints. Petalpaw came up with only a few scratches, and Ravenpaw sent him back to his den, along with Brightpaw right behind him.

Foxpounce seemed happy to enter the den despite the large bloody wound on his back, most likely wanting to see his injured mate. Silverstrike didn't have any bleeding wounds, but his shoulder looked weird, and he claimed it felt like fire when he touched it to the ground, so he was sent into the den as well.

Stonecoat and Shadefur came up together. While Stonecoat had a long scratch down his leg, Shadefur was only missing a big nick in his ear-- large enough that it could possibly become infected. He sent both his older brothers in.

"I knew you'd be good at being a medicine cat," Shadefur meowed.

"I did, too!" Stonecoat quickly agreed with his identical littermate.

Oakcloud padded up with a wounded shoulder, and just gave Ravenpaw a knowing nod and entered. He was the mate of a medicine cat, after all, and knew he needed to be seen.

Boulderclaw and Snowfern were last, and they came up together, watching their son with glowing eyes. "You're doing great, my kit," Snowfern breathed into his ear, coming close and rubbing her cheek with his. "You'd better go help Mossrain." Ravenpaw leaned back and looked them both over quickly.

Boulderclaw's thick fur easily would've hidden any injuries, but he was clean of blood as well, so Ravenpaw knew he'd be sent back to his den. Snowfern had a few simple scratches on her flank, which could've been seen to but didn't have to be. "I think both of you are fine to go back to your den." It seemed weird to tell his parents what to do.

"I want to check on Blossompaw," Snowfern meowed and didn't let her kit deny her request, for she pushed past him. Boulderclaw snorted after his mate, said a quiet goodbye to his son, then left.

Ravenpaw followed his mother into the den and was shocked by the cramped air. It was usually more open, but now it was full of restless, injured cats. "Ravenpaw!" Mossrain called from where he sat next to Grayblaze, who lay out on a nest, muttering under his breath in pain. "Separate cats depending on their injuries then start healing."

Ravenpaw nodded, and based on his earlier observations, he went Eagleclaw, Stonecoat, Silverstrike, and Foxpounce to nests to lay down, saying to Mossrain, "they should be checked after Grayblaze and Russetdawn. Eagleclaw was stepped on, Stonecoat has a bad leg wound, I think Silverstrike's shoulder might be dislocated or something, and Foxpounce has a bad bite on his shoulder and a scratch on his back."

Goldenpool looked over from where she held cobwebs against Russetdawn's stomach, eyeing the silver tom awkwardly settling in a nest. "I agree, Ravenpaw, it does look dislocated," she confirmed, then went back to her patient.

Feeling proud of himself, Ravenpaw padded to the other, less injured cats and looked at their wounds. Oakcloud's shoulder seemed the easiest to treat, so Ravenpaw meowed to the tom, "clean your shoulder the best you can," before hurrying over to the herbs

lining the ground.He grabbed marigold and goldenrod, then chewed them together, flinching at the two sharp tastes mixing into a poultice. He hurried back to Oakcloud, who moved away from his wound to show that not only had he cleaned it, he had brushed his fur away from it so it was easier to get to. Ravenpaw shot him a grateful look.

"Not my first time," Oakcloud meowed.

Once Ravenpaw finished chewing the mixture, he spits it out evenly over the wound, then began licking it against the open skin, trying not the gag at the strong, sharp blood scent. Despite his many moons, Oakcloud still flinched at the painful touch.

Ravenpaw tried not to withdraw, knowing the sooner he was done, the better. As he got closer to finishing, Oakcloud let out a murmur of relief, and his tensed muscles relaxed. Ravenpaw went back to the herbs and grabbed cobwebs, then went back to the brown tabby and spread the cobwebs over the wound, carefully tying the ends into the tom's thick fur.

"Mossrain, I've finished with Oakcloud's wound!" he called to his mentor, looking over to where the tom was still working tirelessly on helping Grayblaze. He looked rather hurried, reaching for herbs while still holding onto a wound, his tail lashing.

"Oakcloud, go back to your den. If you can't sleep, come tell me or Ravenpaw and we'll give you a few poppy seeds. Come back and see us in the morning so we can check your wounds, but know you'll have no patrols for a few days."

The brown tabby got unsteadily to his paws, sighing. "May I sleep in the nursery?" he asked, likely wanting to be with his kits.

"Please." Goldenpool shot her mate a grateful glance. It was obvious she desperately wanted to be with her kits but was torn by her duty to her Clan that she was forced to uphold, as the code said. She could have kits, but in time of need, her Clan would have to come first.

Ravenpaw left the tom and flicked his tail for Shadefur to come up,

and the tom sat on the loose moss bedding Ravenpaw had decided to treat his patients on. His older brother had only a few light scratches on his pelt, which likely didn't need any herbs except one on his side.Ravenpaw chewed up some goldenrod and licked it softly only his brother's wound, then covered it lightly with cobwebs and took a look at the tom's torn ear. "Mossrain, how do I heal an ear?"

"Use some marigold and lay some dry oak over the tear. Cover the entire ear with cobwebs to keep the dry oak in place and have the cat leave it alone. Ear tears get infected easily, so the dry oak should help keep it away and the marigold will help it heal faster. I want the cat--" Mossrain looked over his shoulder to see Shadefur-- "I want Shadefur to stay in his den until tomorrow morning, and I'll recheck his wound then."

Ravenpaw went and grabbed a few marigold petals and two dry oak leaves, along with a pawful of cobwebs, and he brought them back to his brother. He chewed the marigold into a paste and spat it out onto his brother's nicked ear, using the tip of his tongue to spread it around in a thick layer. Shadefur flinched every few moments but tried to keep still.

Once he was done, Ravenpaw picked up the oak leaves to apply them, but then Mossrain meowed, "chew up one of the leaves and cover the other one to stick it down to Shadefur's ear."

Ravenpaw mewled a quiet confirmation that he had understood, and quickly chewed one of the tasteless leaves before spitting it out and, using his claws to keep it still, licked it onto the second leaf. One finished, he picked it gently up in his teeth and lay it over the large tear in the ear.

Shadefur hissed in pain and flicked his ear away, and Ravenpaw couldn't help but grumble, upset. "Sorry," Shadefur meowed good-humoredly, forcing his ear to perk up. Ravenpaw flicked his flank softly and lovingly before fixing the placing on the leaf, then he reached down to the cobwebs and spread them out into an even web. Carefully with both front paws, he leaned back onto his haunches and circled the webs around the ear, carefully tightening them around the leaf to keep it in place.

"You're all good," Ravenpaw meowed, feeling a little proud of himself for doing something so important for not only his Clan but for his kin as well.

"Thanks." Shadefur leaned over and touched his nose to the younger tom's ear. "One day you'll be a great medicine cat, and your apprentice will be proud to have you."

Ravenpaw felt heat cover his pelt. He had heard so many praises involving a future apprentice, one who hasn't even been born yet--it was even possible his apprentice's parents hadn't even been born. Or maybe, it could Stormkit's own kit, once she was old enough to have a mate. Ravenpaw, somehow, felt a flash of excitement at seeing the small kit with her own family. Even though she was so young, he considered her a friend.

"Ravenpaw," Goldenpool meowed, raising her head from Russetdawn, who was breathing heavy and moving her limbs weakly as she struggled to catch her breath. The apprentice looked over at the golden tabby as Shadefur left the den, nodding to Stonecoat as he passed.

"Yes, Goldenpool?" he meowed.

"Treat Maskdapple's wound with comfrey roots and marigold then cover it with cobwebs," the tabby ordered.

"Yes, Goldenpool." He dipped his head and grabbed the desired herbs, watching Mossrain move from Grayblaze, who now fell into a troubled and weak sleep, to help Eagleclaw, lying uncomfortably in a nest.

"Goldenpool," Silverstrike spoke up, "why is Ravenpaw treating the less injured instead of us, the ones who truly need it the most?" Maskdapple, his mate, shot him a disapproving glance, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Because Ravenpaw is still young," Mossrain replied before his mentor could. "He doesn't know how to put bones back in place or how to care for deep wounds--that's why he is put on the simpler cases so we can get those cats in and out and back to hunting. Once

Ravenpaw is done with Maskdapple he will help Foxpounce's shoulder, then finish Eagleclaw while I treat Foxpounce's back wound and Goldenpool can put Silverstrike's shoulder back in place. Stonecoat is the youngest and frankly strongest of all of you so he can last the longest. When Goldenpool or I are done we'll move onto him."

Ravenpaw tried to grasp everything his mentor had said, and decided to focus on where he came in; he was to finish Maskdapple, work on Foxpounce's shoulder, then cover any of Eagleclaw's wounds that Mossrain didn't finish.

Silverstrike grumbled something that Ravenpaw didn't catch and the apprentice continued chewing the comfrey roots until they were a thick paste and scooped some marigold into his jaws. As he continued chewing he did his best to ignore the bitter taste from the marigold. When it was at the consistency that Mossrain had taught him, he spread the poultice over Maskdapple's wound with his tongue then began working it deeper into the wound. Maskdapple hissed in pain and dug her claws into the nest, clenching her teeth. Her muscles tightened and obviously sent pain from her wound, but she was a strong warrior and forced her muscles to relax. Ravenpaw knew he didn't need to thank her, but he did flick his ear in gratitude.

When he had evenly distributed the poultice he went back over and grabbed a wad of cobwebs, then spread them carefully over the wound, using them to keep it closed and safe from infection. "Maskdapple, go back to your den, but no hunting until we clear you," Mossrain called to his mother.

The she-cat got unsteadily to her paws and went over to the young tom, touching his ear with her nose. "I'm so proud of you," she murmured to him, and Mossrain seemed to lean into her, taking in her sweet scent. Ravenpaw suddenly realized that no matter how old you were, your mother was the one thing that made you feel safe and young again.

A sudden pang went through his heart, and he pictured Boulderclaw, mourning over Berrywhisker's frail, gray body in the middle of the clearing. Ravenpaw could see himself just as easily

leaning over his own mother's limp body, sending her safely to StarClan, and it sent fear through him.

"Ravenpaw, get on to Foxpounce, now," Goldenpool called with strain in her meow, and the apprentice forced his mind clear as he quickly trotted over to Foxpounce, who sat in a nest near Russetdawn, watching the she-cat with eyes like a hawk searching for prey. The love and fear in his eyes was overwhelming.

"There's nothing more I can do for her," Goldenpool meowed, stepping away from ginger-brown she-cat. Terror went through Foxpounce, and he stiffened.

"She's okay, isn't she? You're not giving up?"

"No, I'm not giving up, but I've done all I can right now. Now she needs rest and time for her wounds to heal."

"But she'll be okay?" Foxpounce asked scaredly when she didn't answer his question. Goldenpool hesitated for a moment, staring down at the she-cat. "She is strong, and we must believe in StarClan to allow her to pull through. I need to go check on my kits, I will return in a moment." She turned around without another word and disappeared.

Silverstrike hissed in annoyance. "She needs to focus on injured cats, not her kits!"

"Silverstrike, please," Mossrain meowed quietly, his ears down, and Ravenpaw felt like a mouse-brain needing a heartbeat to remember Silverstrike was his father. Maskdapple was his mother, after all!

"She is allowed to have kits, just like anyone else. Allow her a moment away from stress," Eagleclaw said wisely, and Silverstrike looked like he wanted to argue, but he stayed quiet.

"Silverstrike, let me put Eagleclaw's shoulder back in place, then I'll do yours. Ravenpaw, I want to show you how to do this. Grab that stick over there, please."

Ravenpaw pattered to the herb store and grabbed a heavy stick leaned against the cave wall, feeling his teeth go into old marks

from other cats. He brought it back to Mossrain, who grabbed it by the end and held it out for Eagleclaw to take. She clamped her jaws around it then nodded, ears flat and breathing slow.

"You have the cat bite on a stick so they don't hurt their jaws, then you have them lay down." He nodded to Eagleclaw, and the deputy awkwardly lay down on her side, shifting the stick to make it more comfortable. "Now, you feel for where the bone went out of place. Touch here gently." Mossrain softly ran his paw over the fur right next to Eagelclaw's shoulder, and Ravenpaw copied him, feeling the bone swollen and out of place.

"How do we get it back into place?" he asked.

Mossrain purred, and placed both his paws on Eagleclaw's shoulder, right behind the displaced bone. He flicked his ears, then pushed suddenly. With a pop, the bone slid back into place, and Eagleclaw bit down hard onto the stick, sending a few splinters everywhere.

"And *that* is how we put a bone back in place."

I'm so sorry for taking such a long break. School got very stressful and I was having family trouble, but here's an update after wwwayyyy too long. Hopefully, I'll get back to posting once and a while, but the chapters will be shorter (most likely). I promise I'll try my best not to take such a big break next time!

Question #1: Are you happy the story's back?

Question #2: which storyline do you enjoy most, Rowanpaw's or Ravenpaw's? Which one would you like to see more of?

Chapter Twelve

"Sandflight! Someone get Sandflight!"

Rowanpaw woke with a shock, mind blurry from sleep. It wasn't just the calling that had given him such a quick awakening, but the fact that it came from Emberheart. Carppaw was gone from the small den, and Blazepaw slept smoothly in the back corner. But Frondpaw raised her head, brown eyes worried.

"What's going on?" she muttered, letting out a large yawn.

"I'll find out," Rowanpaw said quietly, trying to stretch out his limbs, but the den was too small and his back hit the top of the small cave. Sighing, he struggled out of the entrance, legs sore from a tough battle training with Hazelfur yesterday. She had shown him all sorts of new moves to practice with the other apprentices and had done a number on him physically--he was aching everywhere.

When he left the apprentices den, he saw from the small opening of the camp entrance that it was still dark, and a few cats had appeared from the warriors' den, looking worried. Sandflight's tail was disappearing into the nursery. Hickoryclaw slipped from the warriors' den, looking worried, and hurried after the medicine cat. Just a few moments later, Heronclaw and Brackenfoot, the mates of the other two queens, went after him.

Even though it would be crowded, Rowanpaw headed over, wanting to make sure his friend Emberheart was okay. When he got over, Brackenfoot slipped from the den and looked around the clearing to the cats filing out, looking curious and worried. "Rainsong has begun kitting." He didn't sound too happy about it, probably because he was just like his brother and didn't agree with the former loners living in the Clan.

Now knowing what was happening, many of the Clan relaxed, though some still looked worried for the she-cat. "A little early, isn't it?" Leafpelt murmured to Bloomcloud, who shrugged. "Sandflight

said just a few sunrises ago she had another quarter moon until she'd have her kits."

Rowanpaw let the she-cats gossip and slunk into the den, narrowly missing Heronclaw as he left. Rainsong lay spread out in her nest, stomach bulging up as she breathed quickly and heavily. Ashbreeze looked over through narrowed eyes, hiding her kits from the sight, despite the small nose of Breamkit poking out from behind her tail.

Primkit and her sisters lay in their own nest, watching with wide eyes. "Primkit, Meadowkit, Fernkit!" he called, not wanting them to see it either. They looked at him curiously. "Let's head out into the clearing, all right?"

"But we wanna see!" Primkit denied, even though both Meadowkit and Fernkit headed over quietly. Seeing she was beaten, Primkit huffed then followed, tail high in the air.

"Fernkit can stay," Sandflight called unexpectedly. "She'll need to see it sometime if she works with me in the future."

The small kit looked at him with bright, shining eyes. "Oh, Can I, Ro--Ratpaw?"

Though he hated the name, Rowanpaw was glad the kit had caught herself before she revealed his secret. He couldn't believe how the three kits listened to him so well like he was their guardian and not some low-ranking apprentice. "Alright, but only you. Primkit, Meadowkit, out you get." He shoved the two kits out kindly with his nose, then looked over at Emberheart. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

Emberheart purred. "No, I'm alright. Though, suggest to Clovertail or Dawnstar that we need more hunting patrols. Rainsong will be hungry and needs to feed her kits," Emberheart said, and Rowanpaw nodded, turning to leave. "Ratpaw," she added, and he looked over. "You're very good with them. You'll be a good father one day."

Embarrassment flooded him, and he hurried to leave. The kits were running over to Wishpaw, mewing in excitement. Rowanpaw

spotted Clovertail and Dawnstar and went over to them quickly. "Excuse me?" he said softly, waiting for the two she-cats to look at him before he said anything else. "Emberheart thinks some more hunting patrols would be useful because Rainsong needs prey."

The two she-cats looked at each other, speaking silently through their eyes. Dawnstar nodded, and Clovertail told him, "I'll send out a few different patrols around the territory."

"I'll go!" Hawktail hurried over. "I want to help any way I can." Disgusted, Rowanpaw turned and left them alone. With his siblings busy playing with Wishpaw, he went back into the nursery. Emberheart was in her nest, watching with interest with Fernkit snuggled against her, watching Rainsong closely.

Her stomach was rippling, and Sandflight softly ran her paw along her stomach. "I don't have the right herbs to help you with this," Rainsong said, "but these should ease the pain." She gave a few leaves and berries to Rainsong to eat, and after she chewed and swallowed, Sandflight fit a stick into her jaws. She bit down, grunting in pain.

Rowanpaw didn't know what to do, so he went over and settled next to Emberheart's side, tucking into her warmth. He rested his head on his paws, anxiety pumping through his heart. Rainsong grunted and groaned and lashed her tail, but Sandflight just quietly shushed her and ran her mud-stained paw over the queen's swollen side.

Suddenly, Rainsong convulsed, and something slid out into the nest, small and silky. Sandflight leaned over and gently cut it with her teeth, and a tiny kit rolled out, still and pale. Rowanpaw felt the fear wave from Sandflight as she leaned over the kit, desperately licking the kit's side. "Ratpaw, take Fernkit out of the den. Now." Emberheart's voice was tense and fearful.

Instantly, Rownapaw rose up and quickly nudged Fernkit out, despite her mewls of complaint about wanting to watch. Outside in the clearing, Rowanpaw sent her off to Wishpaw, then began to pace. The clearing was emptying out as more patrols were sent to the forest, but Rowanpaw ignored everybody and continued to

move back and forth. Was that kit really dead?

He looked up at the nursery when there was a loud, painful yowl. Stretching his claws, he continued to walk around.

It seemed like moons before the patrols began to trickle in, though only a few cats brought something. After all three returned, there was only two rats, a frog, and a small snake for the entire Clan. "How's Rainsong?" Bloomcloud asked.

"I don't know," Rowanpaw responded, stretching his claws. Cats continued to come over to ask how things were, but he gave shorter and shorter responses until he was just shrugging or shaking his head. The sun was already rising through the sky, the last bit of orange leaving when Sandflight stepped out of the small nursery.

Most cats had gone out on patrols, so only a few were left in the clearing. They all looked over. "How are the kits?" Wishpaw asked with her tail tucked around Primkit and her sisters.

Sandflight looked at her paws. "There was three," she said softly.

"*Was*?" Juniperfur said with fear.

Sandflight looked sadly at the cats. "Two came out dead. Only one tom has survived." Just as she finished speaking, Hickoryclaw padded from the den, two tiny shapes in his jaws. His eyes were glazed with sadness but other than that he showed no emotion. He silently carried the two kits to the center of the camp and lay them down. "Rainsong is feeding... She wants to be alone."

He crouched down onto his stomach, resting his nose against the lifeless bodies of his kits. For a moment, the cats stood still, then they slowly lay down to mourn the loss of the small Clan members. Rowanpaw went to his siblings and pulled them close to him, completely silent. As they lay there, more cats returned from patrols, only to find silent, mourning cats.

Hazelfur let out a sad, mournful moan, and Hawktail froze at the entrance to the camp with Aspenheart by his side. Rowanpaw

wished that instead of the small, helpless kits, the two "warriors" had died instead to spare their little lives. *StarClan, you have a sick sense of humor.* How come two awful, traitorous cats were allowed to live, but two tiny kits couldn't even see a speck of life? Their brother would now grow up alone.

They'll have me, Rowanpaw decided. And Primkit, Fernkit, and Meadowkit. This kit would *not* be lonely. There was also Ashbreeze's litter, once the she-cat was brave enough to let her kits leave her side. She was very protective of them, after losing the entirety of her first litter almost eight moons ago, before Rowanpaw had been born. And he couldn't forget Emberheart's.

Rowanpaw looked over when he heard claws scraping the camp entrance, and he saw a patrol of Brownear, Birchsplash, and Leafpelt returning, no prey with them. "Oh, no..." Birchsplash's eyes went wide with distress, and with barely any hesitation, he disappeared back into the forest. Deciding he wasn't doing anything to help, just lying here, Rowanpaw jumped up and raced after him.

He got to the top of the drop and looked down, seeing Birchsplash steadying himself. "Can I come with you?" he called.

Birchsplash looked up and nodded to him, looking relieved he wasn't going alone. Rowanpaw jumped down, flinching from the squishing mud, but forced himself to straighten. "Where are we going? Near the Twoleg place? Against the Thunderpath? By the mountain?" He was anxious to get moving and to hunt for his Clan.

"Unclaimed territory," Birchsplash responded after a small pause, heading on quick paws on the path they followed to the Gathering.

Rowanpaw stumbled after him. "But, we can't! Dawnstar forbid cats from going there after our patrol disappeared!" About six moons ago, Dawnstar had sent a patrol of five of her warriors out to the unclaimed territory on the opposite side of the Thunderpath the Twoleg place was, but they never returned. She had refused to let any other cats go that way again and instead decided on the Twoleg place instead. That didn't turn out too good either. At least she got more cats this time.

"Rainsong's kits died because she didn't have enough prey in her body to keep them strong," Birchsplash said without turning to look at the apprentice hurrying after him. "I won't let that happen to Emberheart. She'd be heartbroken. I'm going to the unclaimed territory to find as much prey as I can, then I'll return to camp. When Dawnstar sees I got so much prey from outside our forest, she'll allow us to hunt out there."

"I still don't understand why Dawnstar won't let us go out there. What if the patrol just decided to leave the Clan, and that's why they didn't return?" It had been a thought Rowanpaw had had in his mind for quite some moons.

"Because she picked cats that she knew wouldn't do that. The head of the patrol was her mate."

Rowanpaw nodded, even though Birchsplash wasn't watching him. They continued on in silence for a little bit, but then the apprentice felt a drop of rain plop onto his ear. "It's raining," he pointed out.

"Only lightly," Birchsplash responded. But, pretty soon, it got heavier and heavier until it was soaking their fur. The mud was getting deeper and was sticking their paws down into the dirt, but Birchsplash didn't slow. If anything, he just kept moving faster. Rowanpaw focused on moving his paws, looking down at the smelly ground, and he was glad when he smelled EchoClan's wet forest in his scent glands.

He hurried up despite the pulling mud and pulled himself up onto the Thunderpath, and he was surprised when Birchsplash did it too. Rowanpaw decided it was because he just wanted to move faster. They passed the area they go through into the Gathering Hollow but Birchsplash continued on with confidence. Rowanpaw was getting anxiety from leaving his territory again, especially without Blazepaw knowing. He had betrayed his brother by leaving once before, and now he was doing it again. And this time it was against his leader's orders.

Rowanpaw realized his legs were starting to burn but was glad to see Birchsplash was beginning to slow, since they were passing the place where the mountains came close, right to the edge of the

Thunderpath. It slowly spread out again, showing a beautiful forest much like EchoClan's. Excitement filled Rowanpaw, and he raced forward, tiredness forgotten.

The rain was still pounding down, but Rowanpaw just found that it let out more smells from the leaves and plants. He saw a mouse scuttle from a tree to another, and Birchsplash mewed happily and raced after it, tail streaming out behind him. Rowanpaw just waited for a moment, letting the rain soak his coat. Then, he went after Birchsplash.

The pouring rain made it hard to smell anything alive, and it hid most sounds, too. He managed to track Birchsplash's way by following the trail of broken bushes and stepped on leaves. Eventually, he saw the tom's white and black pelt up ahead, crouched in the undergrowth. Sensing something was wrong, he crept up to the older tom. Birchsplash barely moved when he came up, and flicked his ear for silence.

Ahead of them, in a small clearing, a pale tabby tomcat faced a smaller animal. Rowanpaw almost thought it looked like a fox, but sense told him it was another cat. She was small, with dirty red-ginger fur and white paws and muzzle. Her long legs were very skinny, and her green eyes shined with starvation. The tom was growling, fur bristling despite the rain.

"Give me your mouse before I take it," he snarled, tail lashing, and Birchsplash's claws dug into the wet earth.

"Please, I need it for my kits," the she-cat had a quiet, soft mew, showing that she was rather young.

"Did you hear me?" the tom growled. "I said, give me your mouse!" He jerked his body forward, threatening to attack, and the she-cat dropped her prey and fled, fluffy tail streaming out behind her. The tom laughed, throwing his head as he approached the small piece of prey.

But his teeth had barely closed around it before Birchsplash launched, racing across the clearing and barreling him over. Despite his size, the rogue didn't seem to know how to fight and struggled

under Birchsplash's thin frame.

All talk, no fight, Rowanpaw thought as Birchsplash easily pinned the tom. He padded over, sniffing the mouse. It was heavy with the she-cat's scent, and he could smell her fear trail leading away, though the rain was slowly making it disappear.

"You dare attack another cat like that again, and I'll find you," Birchsplash hissed in the tom's ear, who snarled but stayed still, since the warrior's claws were against his throat. Growling, Birchsplash sent a sharp, painful bite to the back of the tom's neck, dragging him across the clearing. The tom wiggled and cried out, and Birchsplash threw him to the side. Scrambling to his paws, the tom fled, still bleeding from his neck.

"Can we find that she-cat to make sure she's okay? She mentioned she had kits." Rowanpaw felt anxiety for the young cat, knowing how hard it was without food. After all, that was why they came here.

"I was going to suggest the same thing," Birchsplash meowed, licking the other tom's blood from his claws with a sour look. The warrior and apprentice headed off, following the dying scent trail of the terrified young mother. Her fear made her easier to track, and soon her scent got stronger, and Rowanpaw spied a cave in the distance. But another scent tainted the air.

"Fox!" Birchsplash gasped, racing towards the cave. Rowanpaw raced after him, and he heard a pained groaning, followed by the snarling of a fox. The two cats raced into the cave to see a large male fox with his teeth gripped in the small she-cat's scruff, pulling at her. Without a pause, Rowanpaw leaped on the fox, barreling it over. Its teeth left the poor cat's neck and it snapped at the apprentice, but Birchsplash was there.

He snatched the fox's ear and tugged hard, digging his claws into its cheek. It whined and growled at the same time. Rowanpaw focused on causing as much pain on its side as he could, but a strong back leg kicked him away. Rowanpaw wiggled on the ground for a moment, trying to find his paws. "Get that she-cat and kits out of here! I'll deal with the fox!" Birchsplash growled as the fox flicked

him away, but he quickly jumped back on, digging his claws and teeth into the creature.

Rowanpaw scrambled to his paws, claws scraping the ground, and hurried to the she-cat, who was groaning and moving her front paws as she tried to gain control of herself. Rowanpaw crouched over her, grabbing a pile of moss from the small nest and stuffing it against her bleeding neck. Inside the next, two tiny kits struggled to move, looking tiny and weak. They were likely just barely a moon old.

"Mother?" The lighter one, a ginger she-kit, was bigger than her other littermate, and softly tried to move her head around.

The she-cat on the ground moaned in pain, trying to claw closer. "Maple..." she whispered, and as Rowanpaw crouched over her, her weak green eyes locked onto his bright amber gaze. "Take care...of my kits..." she seemed to be struggling to breathe.

"We're getting all three of you out of here." Rowanpaw could hear the growls and snarls from his Clanmate that was desperately fighting the fox.

"I... I can't move," she whispered. "I know that I'm going to die. Just..." She coughed, struggling to breathe, and blood leaked from her jaws, staining her teeth. "My kits... Tumble, Maple... Keep them safe..." Her voice was getting quieter, and she muttered something Rowanpaw couldn't catch.

"What? Say it again?" He leaned his ear close, feeling her rasping breath on his whiskers.

"Keep them away from... from... from MothClan..."

MothClan? Time seemed to freeze. There was another Clan?

"Where is it? Where's MothClan?" Rowanpaw tried to rush the she-cat before she bled out.

The she-cat whimpered, looking longingly at her kits. "Just... Keep them away..." She was now gasping, blood soaking her neck and chin, along with the stone ground around them. Rowanpaw could

feel it hitting his toes, mixing with the dried mud. "Don't let Mothstar get them... Don't let her know..."

Rowanpaw could see the shuttering in her body, and remembered it from seeing so many deaths. The poor she-cat was moments from death.

"I promise," Rowanpaw muttered. "I'll... I'll keep Maple and Tumble away from... *MothClan*." It felt weird to say it. A fifth Clan... Or sixth, counting StarClan. How far were they? If this she-cat came from there, that meant they couldn't be too far. If she didn't want that place knowing about her kits, she would've left just under two moons ago. Would they come looking for her or her kits? By the sound of it, MothClan was dangerous.

Relief flooded the she-cat's weakening eyes, but a few moments later her vision glazed over, and she stared into nothing. Rowanpaw felt a pang of regret. Not only did the young she-cat die, but her two kits would have to grow up without their parents. Like him...

"StarClan, please take in this she-cat and allow her to watch over her kits..."

"Rowanpaw! Help!"

Suddenly, he was shaken out of his trance, and he shot around, seeing that the fox had thrown Birchsplash down, and was approaching him with an arched back. Without a pause, Rowanpaw launched for the fox, attaching to its back and digging his teeth into its scruff, just like it had to the poor she-cat.

It howled and tried to violently shake him off, but he held on, wanting revenge. He wanted revenge on all the cats any fox had taken from him. So many Clanmates had died because of a fox attack, along with poor Copper, who was just trying to protect his family. Rowanpaw dug his teeth harder, feeling the fox's meat crunch and fold. It felt its muscles tensing and could feel it's pain in his own body from its heart-wrenching cries.

But he held on. He locked his claws in the monster's thick, fluffy fur. He felt the fox buckle, its legs falling under it, and suddenly it

went limp. It collapsed on its side and he jumped away, just before it would've crushed him. Birchsplash struggled to his feet, gasping. Blood welled from many different places on his body, soaking the white of his pelt.

"The kits?" he muttered, struggling to keep his head up.

Rowanpaw hurried over, sniffing the two small bundles of fur, and they wiggled, mewling pathetically. The tomkit seemed worse-off. "Weak but alive," the apprentice answered.

"And the mother?" Birchsplash was moving his leg, most likely trying to stop an invisible aching.

"Gone," Rowanpaw whispered. He opened his mouth, ready to tell him about MothClan. But something stopped him. He couldn't bring himself to tell his friend that this mother was running for something that might come after them. *They won't know the kits are hers,* he reminded himself. Maybe, just maybe, it was better this way...

"We need to get them somewhere safe," Birchsplash meowed, struggling over on three legs. The kits mewled uncomfortably at his strong-smelling blood. Slowly, unsteadily, he backed away and started cleaning himself off with soft strokes of his tongue.

"That was their mother's dying wish," Rowanpaw said, leaving out MothClan. "She wants them safe and healthy. But we can't provide that in BatClan--we have too many cats to feed and not enough to feed them."

"Then we'll leave them here? Let them die?" Birchsplash took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down.

"No, we'll bring them to EchoClan." He would give these kits a chance. He knew Acornstar was rather estranged to any sort of life, but even she wouldn't leave two kits to die if they were on the edge of her territory. Right? "We'll leave them on the edge of the Thunderpath at the most common point their patrols go to, and we'll watch them from our territory until they're saved."

"And if a patrol doesn't come?" Birchsplash asked.

"When we get back, it should be the normal time for a round across their territory. If a little while passes and they still don't come, we'll move the kits farther into their territory. We'll cover our smell, first, so they trust the kits."

Birchsplash looked hesitant. "Are you sure? We'd be letting an enemy raise future warriors to fight against us."

"I'm sure, Birchsplash," Rowanpaw said softly. "We aren't their enemies. We're just in conflict. In times of need, we'll all come together, and that's when two extra warriors will count, from any Clan."

Birchsplash looked faintly impressed. "I'll remember that when an EchoClan cat is digging their claws into me."

"Let's get them to their new territory." Rowanpaw decided to ignore Birchsplash's humorous comment. He went over to the kits and nudged them both.

"Mother?" the she-kit whimpered, rolling softly and shining her big yellow eyes at him. "Who are you? Where's Violet?"

Violet, Rowanpaw thought, *that must be their mother.* "Violet's a friend of ours. She asked us to take care of you."

"Where are we going?" who he assumed was Maple mewed quietly.

"To a new home, where you'll have food and water and warmth," Rowanpaw meowed softly. "It's a little far, can you walk there?"

The she-kit let out a little mew. "I think so, but Tumble won't." She struggled to her tiny white paws, light ginger fur ruffled and dirty. Rowanpaw couldn't help but give it a few cleaning licks, and she mewled in surprise but curled into his warm touch. She touched a tiny paw to her brother's side.

He groaned, rolling his stomach, but didn't speak. The tiny she-kit looked over at Rowanpaw, looking fearful. He knew she wouldn't actually be able to walk, so he leaned down and said, "have you ever had a badger ride?" She shook her head quietly. "Well, what you do is climb onto my back and tuck into my fur."

She looked faintly excited as she clawed her way onto his shoulders. She was small enough her weight wouldn't be a problem, though her tiny sharp claws were painful. When she was settled, Rowanpaw gripped Tumble's scruff in his mouth and picked him up, trying to ignore his cry of a complaint. Birchsplash stood next to him, blocking the kits' vision from their mother's body.

Rowanpaw wished they could bury her, but they had to get the kits to safety. He vowed to himself to come back soon and make her a grave and send her off properly.

They went through the forest quietly, with Birchsplash limping behind the apprentice, while Maple let out a few squeaks once and a while. Some were of fear, some were of excitement. The travel through the forest seemed to take longer than before, and Rowanpaw barely noticed the rain, which was slowing down.

Tumble was limp in his jaws, and his teeth were beginning to ache. He would've thought the kit was dead if it wasn't for his tiny muttering. The group continued walking until they reached where the mountains narrowed, and they were forced to walk on the Thunderpath. Birchsplash had rasping breath, coughing as he limped along. He needed to see Sandflight.

Rowanpaw stopped when they reached where the mountains spread open into Clan territory again. He set Tumble down and tucked him against his legs, then meowed to the older cat, "Birchsplash, head home. Tell Dawnstar we were attacked by a fox and after we beat it I stayed behind to make sure there were no others while you returned home to get your wounds treated."

Birchsplash took a hesitant step, still covered in drying blood, thick fur in clumps. "When did I start taking orders from an apprentice?" he said, mostly to himself.

"When he became smarter than you," Rowanpaw retorted playfully. "Now get to camp, I'll get these two safe."

"Are we not staying with you?" Maple mewed.

"No, you're going somewhere safer." Rowanpaw picked up Tumble

again and headed along the Thunderpath, listening to Birchsplash's pawsteps fade away into their muddy territory. Rowanpaw carried on for a little while until he was deeper in between the two territories, and when he knew he'd have a vantage spot from his own territory but wouldn't be seen.

He just hoped the poor kits wouldn't starve before EchoClan found them.

In case you realized that, "hey, this didn't fit with the time of the prologue!" I realized that when I started writing it (it was a spur of the moment of "instead of her coming in later, why not now?") so I went back and changed the prologue, only stuff that mentioned snow and changed it to rain. Hopefully, I found all the parts mentioning it, though I might have missed something.

Question #1: What are your thoughts about MothClan, by how Violet speaks of it?

Question #2: Do you think MothClan will cause trouble in the future?

Question #3: Do you think Rowanpaw made a good decision giving the kits to EchoClan?

Chapter Thirteen

At first, Ravenpaw didn't know what had woken him from his deep sleep. He was incredibly tired from helping all the cats after their battle with the dogs, and he had collapsed in his nest instantly after. He felt groggy and his vision was blurred.

As it slowly cleared and his eyes brightened, he saw a shape near the entrance of the medicine cat's den, slowly moving over to where Russetdawn and Grayblaze--the only two cats staying overnight in the den--lay sleeping off their poppy seeds. Foxpounce had almost stayed in the den, but he fluttered over Russetdawn and distracted Mossrain from working, so he was sent to his den.

For a moment Ravenpaw didn't recognize the figure, but soon he saw the black shape was actually the brown-orange coat of his leader, Acornstar, walking quietly into the den with the moonlight hiding her form.

Ravenpaw almost called out to her, but something caught his words before he could make a sound, and he stayed in his nest, head down, ears flat, tail lightly flicking, with his eyes wide open in curiosity. Acornstar walked over on gentle paws to where her three warriors lay in nests and bent her head over them.

"StarClan," the leader said softly, barely loud enough for Ravenpaw to hear, "why do this to my warriors? Are you still punishing me? I have tried to clear my mind, but I still can't go on patrols, I don't even want to leave the camp. I just don't know what to do, what *you* want me to do. My dear Redcloud, please guide my pawsteps."

She retreated from the den without another word, with her tail tip twitching softly. Ravenpaw thought about going after her, to try to help her, but he decided his leader wouldn't like to hear anything from a young apprentice. So he closed his eyes and forced himself to stay in his nest. After what felt like moons of just thinking and

thinking, his mind took pity on him and let him slip into a dreamless sleep.

When Ravenpaw awoke again, Mossrain was already out of his nest, leaned over Russetdawn, reapplying more herbs. "Do you need any help?" Ravenpaw asked with a yawn, still half-asleep.

"You worked hard yesterday, so you can rest for a while. We'll need to clean up all the leftover nests, though."

Ravenpaw mewled his agreement and padded over to where Blossompaw lay. "When did she last wake up?"

"I'm awake now," the she-cat suddenly hissed, turning her icy light green eyes on him.

Ravenpaw took a step back in fear. "Leave me alone," she growled, settling her head down again.

"She's not taking the news of her injury well," Mossrain explained.

"That's because I'm fine!" Blossompaw hissed, gathering her front paws under her chest. She pressed down and tried to stand, her back legs twitching, but she collapsed after a moment with a groan of pain.

"Just rest, Blossompaw," Mossrain meowed. "You'll heal eventually, but faster if you don't move."

"I don't care what you have to say!" Blossompaw growled, and Ravenpaw saw her tail struggle to limply move--she was trying to lash it to show her anger, but she was too weak to move it.

"Blossompaw, please," Ravenpaw murmured softly, and she snarled coldly at him.

Sadness darkened Ravenpaw's heart, and he turned and padded away to the empty nests that were spread over the ground. He began pawing the moss together, rolling it tightly into a ball. "Why don't you go visit Goldenpool, and see how she's doing? If you see any of the injured cats, give them a quick once-over for me and send them in if something needs changing."

"I'm fine, Mossrain," Ravenpaw mewled quietly, hating the thought of Mossrain thinking he was so weak he couldn't handle the aftermath of a battle. But his mind was still fresh with the look of the injured warriors, the blood seeping from their wounds. Most of them looked like it didn't bother them, but Russetdawn and Grayblaze had looked a moment from StarClan.

Russetdawn still does, Ravenpaw thought, looking at the two injured cats. Grayblaze looked fine, with his leg back and place and cobwebs flattening his thick fur, but his powerful sides still breathed strongly and evenly.

Russetdawn, on the other paw, was breathing softly and slowly, and her fur looked pale. She was skinny and looked weak, and had a raspy sound coming from her throat.

"As long as you're okay," Mossrain meowed, grabbing some more cobwebs from the herb storage and heading quickly back to the red she-cat.

"I am," Ravenpaw meowed, ignoring a glare from his sister as he walked over to his mentor, staring at Russetdawn with sadness in his gaze. "She's going to be okay, right?"

Mossrain was silent for a while, staring at the weakening she-cat. "For now. All we can do is pray to StarClan not to take away a wonderful warrior and wonderful queen. Her kits are too young to lose their mother..."

"Poor Featherpaw would be heartbroken," Ravenpaw muttered quietly, picturing his dear friend already so distraught with her mother hurt. Ravenpaw imagined losing his own mother and felt a terrifying pang in his chest.

"Ravenpaw, go take a break," Mossrain meowed as he began to cover Russetdawn's wounds with cobwebs.

"I should stay and help," the apprentice denied, licking his jaws as his stomach growled with hunger.

"That's an order, young one," Mossrain retorted, flicking his flank

with his tail. "Now go--eat something then hang out with your siblings or parents or friends. I want you out of camp to get some air."

"What herbs do we need?" He started to pad over to the storage, mouth open to take in the scents, but Mossrain stood and blocked him, butting him in the shoulder to force him towards the den entrance.

"None right now! Go! I don't want to see you back until the sun starts to go down!"

Ravenpaw mewled like a lost kit as he was forced into the clearing, and he stood lost for a few moments. All he knew was herbs, so what else was he supposed to do? *Maybe that's Mossrain's point,* he thought. He had been ignoring everything that wasn't medicine. He was either in the den or in the nursery with Stormkit, and perhaps it was time for him to get out.

Light raindrops misted his coat as he looked around the clearing, and he saw Jaypaw standing with his mentor by the forest entrance, and he hurried over. "Are you going on a patrol?"

"Training exercise, but technically, yes, a patrol," Foxpounce answered. "How's Russetdawn?" Worry sparked in his gaze.

"She's doing better, Mossrain thinks she'll recover," Ravenpaw meowed, wanting to calm the tom even if it wasn't the complete truth. "Can I come with you? Mossrain wants me out of camp for a while." Part of him wanted to be with his brother, while another wanted to watch Foxpounce in case his injuries acted up. *He probably shouldn't even be leaving camp...*

"Sure," Foxpounce answered, checking the camp. "Oakcloud and Brightpaw were supposed to come with us, but he's not here. We'll go without him." Jaypaw flicked his tail excitedly as they headed out of camp. The rocks were slippery from rain, and Ravenpaw's claws scraped the rocks as he tried to get a grip.

Foxpounce made it down before the two brothers, but they soon reached the soft forest floor, the leaves crinkling under their steps.

They padded softly through the forest, sniffing at the dewy fronds that bent under the light rain that got through the thick leaves overhead. "I still remember my first time in the forest," Foxpounce meowed.

"When you went out with Boulderclaw?" Jaypaw mewed excitedly.

"Oh, no!" Foxpounce gave a quiet laugh. "I think I was four moons old, I snuck out to see the forest. I was caught pretty soon after, but it was fun while it lasted. The second time I went out, yes, it was with Boulderclaw as an apprentice. I loved him being my mentor, but it did have some stops in my training."

"What do you mean?" Ravenpaw asked scaredly, tail flicking softly. "Was he not good at training you?"

"Oh, no, he was amazing, he was just occupied," Foxpounce responded humorously. "It wasn't soon after he became a warrior that he started seeing your mother, Snowfern, while she was still a BatClan apprentice--you do know she was from BatClan, right?"

Ravenpaw nodded, while Jaypaw's eyes widened in surprise. "I never knew!" he mewled. "I thought I had pure-blood!" He sounded disappointed.

"You *do* have pure-blood," Foxpounce meowed sternly. "Just because you're half-Clan doesn't make you less of a cat, or less than a warrior. Snowfern is entirely BatClan, but she's a great warrior."

"I guess that's true," Jaypaw mewed, then asked, "can you continue with the story?" His eyes still looked a little lost though, and Ravenpaw suspected he would still be thinking about the new knowledge he had. But talking about memories was good to distract Foxpounce from his injured mate.

"Of course," Foxpounce answered. "Where was I? Right, so, by the time I became Boulderclaw's apprentice, Snowfern had become a warrior in her own Clan, and they started meeting at night. This meant he was often tired and wasn't too good at keeping up with training. I had to be an apprentice for an extra moon, but I was alright with it because when he did teach me he had some amazing

things to say. He was very inspiring. I still remember many things he said to me, even when I was just beginning my apprenticeship. Some things never leave your mind, no matter how hard you try. *'You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only thing you can be,'* he had said. And he was right, so many different times."

Ravenpaw felt inspired by the words, wondering if he was stronger than he thought. Foxpounce moved with grace out of the way of a root, without even looking down, though Ravenpaw did notice he favored his injured leg for a moment. It was like he had memorized the pathway they traveled on. "Was there anything he said that confused you?" Jaypaw asked.

Foxpounce was quiet for a moment, then he meowed, "Well, he once said something along the lines of, *'Cats can fight and fight and fight, but sometimes the even the sharpest claw can't make a wound'*. I never understood what he meant, and It's probably too late to ask."

Ravenpaw narrowed his eyes in thought. *Even the sharpest claw can't make a wound,* he repeated. "What about with SageClan?" he asked.

"What?" Foxpounce looked back at him briefly, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we've been fighting with SageClan for moons. But even when we fight them, it doesn't change anything. Maybe it wasn't a real wound he was talking about, but one in the mind. Fighting can't change what we think," Ravenpaw explained softly, feeling embarrassed.

Foxpounce gave a soft snort of surprise, slowing for a moment. But then he shook his head to clear his thoughts and picked up his pace again. "You know, Ravenpaw, you could just be right. I haven't thought of it like that befo--" he cut himself off short, stopping suddenly. Jaypaw ran into his back legs and quickly backed up.

"What's wrong?" He could likely smell the confused scents coming from his mentor.

"Do you hear that?" Foxpounce asked softly, ears perked. Ravenpaw listened to the quiet forest carefully. He could hear the dropping of

rain, along with the breathing of his Clanmates. But, farther and softer, the faint sound of mewling kits.

"Kits?" Jaypaw said, confused.

"It's this way, near the Thunderpath." Foxpounce leaped forward, racing through the trees with little thought on the apprentices behind him, but they managed to keep up. Ravenpaw heard Foxpounce gasp in pain as he had to take a small leap, likely hurting his shoulder slightly. Soon enough, they broke through the thick undergrowth to the side of the large black path, and Ravenpaw spotted two small ginger shapes in the grass, right on the path's side.

The three of them hurried forward, and for a moment, Ravenpaw thought he saw some dry bushes rustle across the Thunderpath in BatClan territory, but when he looked he couldn't see anything. "The poor things. Are they hurt?"

Ravenpaw realized in shock after a moment that Foxpounce was looking at him, and glance at Jaypaw showed his brother doing the same thing. *You're a medicine cat!* he reminded himself. *You need to know these things!*

"They're definitely starving," he murmured, leaning close to the kits and taking a deep breath of their smell. "Not sick or wounded. They look a little over a moon," he added, noticing that they looked much like Stormkit and her littermates.

"Mother?" Ravenpaw was surprised when the small she-kit spoke, small and weak. She tiredly raised her head, yellow eyes dull. Her light ginger fur was pale and looked limp on her skinny frame. "Who are you?" she mewled to Ravenpaw in confusion.

"I'm Ravenpaw," he said softly, checking her brother's form swiftly to make sure he was alive and found he was breathing softly. "Do you know where your mother is?"

"At our den," the kit muttered. "There was a monster but two of Mother's friends beat it off. They left me here... Where are they? Do you know them?" She looked around softly, searching for the

mystery cats.

Ravenpaw looked at Foxpounce, and said quietly, "they won't survive out here for too long. They need food and shelter." The rain was still light, but it would be dangerous for these kits.

"We can't hope for anybody to come back," the warrior agreed. "I can't smell anything over BatClan's stink, so we can't track the cats who saved them, or stole them. Our best bet is to bring them to camp and get them safe, then come back out tomorrow and see if we can find anything. I can bring a patrol out of the territory to find this den, and maybe their mother."

"She said a monster attacked her den?" Jaypaw piped up softly.

"Perhaps a cat, or a fox or a badger. Let's hope it's not the last option, or it could come to the territories." Foxpounce looked like he was thinking for a moment. "Let's take them back to camp, and Mossrain can look them over before they go into the nursery. Hopefully, Goldenpool will take care of them."

"I'll carry the tom," Ravenpaw offered.

"No, Jaypaw will do that, and I'll carry the she-kit. They might be a little heavy and I don't want you tired in case Mossrain needs your help." Foxpounce licked the she-kit softly on her head then gripped her scruff softly, swinging her up high. She mewled and wiggled but stayed quiet otherwise. Jaypaw carefully picked up the tomkit, who hung limp in his grasp.

The group of cats headed back towards camp, taking a careful but slightly longer trail to keep the kits away from sharp thorns hidden in brambles and other undergrowth. Ravenpaw spotted some borage leaves and quickly snipped a few. He didn't know if these kits still drank milk, but if they did the borage leaves could be used to help Goldenpool feed them.

Soon enough, they reached the rocky pathway that led up to camp, and the cats made a slow and careful way up. Halfway up the rocks, Stonecoat appeared from where he was guarding the camp entrance. "Kits?"

"Found them near the Thunderpath," Ravenpaw explained through his herbs. "They need Mossrain's help." Stonecoat looked hesitant for a moment, but then nodded and let them pass without any further interruption. As they reached the clearing, a few heads looked over, ears rising in curiosity. The she-kit let out a mewl of fear at the new faces.

Ravenpaw went into the medicine cat's den before his brother and Foxpounce, and looked around the den. Blossompaw was sleeping, while Mossrain worked on Grayblaze's wounds. "I told you not to come back until dark!" Mossrain meowed, beginning on a lecture, but Ravenpaw cut him off, dropping the borage leaves to the side of the den entrance.

"Foxpounce, Jaypaw, and I found kits out in the forest," he explained as the two cats came in carrying the small bundles. "The tom is weaker, and they're about a moon old."

Foxpounce dropped the she-kit softly on the ground and hurried to Russetdawn, who lay still, her breath labored. The she-kit mewled pitifully, but Mossrain was already going over, sniffing her tiny head. "Ravenpaw, get a nest ready!"

Quickly, the small apprentice scrapped moss together, and the two kits were settled in the makeshift nest. "Jaypaw, go tell Goldenpool to come here now, then tell Acornstar what happened." The gray and white tom nodded quickly and raced out of the den. It seemed Mossrain knew Foxpounce wasn't going to leave Russetdawn's side, for she looked pale, cold, and weak.

Mossrain tucked the moss close around the kits, then hurried to the herb storage. He murmured under his breath as he desperately checked the roots and leaves. "No, no, no! Mouse-dung! We're out of borage!"

"I found some in the forest, in case Goldenpool needed them," Ravenpaw meowed quickly, racing over and gripping them softly in his jaws before bringing them to his mentor.

"Thank StarClan for your thinking! But they're also for fevers," Mossrain meowed, grabbing some of the leaves, and he began to

fiercely chew them up. *Can't chew themselves,* Ravenpaw reminded himself. Mossrain came over and nodded to Ravenpaw, gesturing with his tail to the she-kit's mouth. Ravenpaw gently opened it with his paws, and Mossrain spat half the herbs in.

"Make her chew and swallow it," he muttered, then got to work on the smaller tom. Ravenpaw followed his mentor's orders. Since the she-cat was more responsive, she began to chew for herself. She tried to spit it up, face curled in disgust.

"You have to swallow it," Ravenpaw told her softly, touching her muzzle with his to keep it closed, then he ran his paw over her throat until she swallowed. "There we go," he murmured, licking her forehead.

Just then, Goldenpool entered the den, looking worried. She hurried over, sniffing the two kits. "Poor things, Jaypaw said you found them on the Thunderpath?" She curled into the nest, letting the kits hide in her stomach fur. The tom barely moved, but sniffed in the direction of the she-cat's stomach. His sister moved over and began suckling, so desperate to eat she didn't care it wasn't her mother.

"Yeah, they said something attacked their den and two 'friends' brought them to the Thunderpath and left them," Ravenpaw explained.

Goldenpool nodded her understanding and nudged the tom to her stomach. The kit sniffed weakly then attached on. "Will we try to find their mother?" the golden tabby asked softly, her eyes lit up with loving care. She was a natural mother and likely wouldn't mind taking care of the little kits.

"Hopefully the she-kit will be strong enough to tell us where she lived, and we can send a patrol out there." Mossrain scratched his claws over the stone, ears flat against his head. He looked up quickly as Acornstar trotted into the den, her head high.

"You're suckling them?" she growled coldly, sniffing crudely at the kits before withdrawing with a snort. Eagleclaw entered the den with soft pawsteps, but she kept quiet.

"They'd die without it," Goldenpool said softly.

"They'll die anyway," Acornstar said confidently. "They aren't staying."

"You can't expect us to just leave them out in the forest!" Mossrain gasped, eyes wide. Ravenpaw felt himself press against the floor, not liking the tone in Acornstar's voice. It scared him.

"They are not ours to take care of," Acornstar growled coldly. She was silent as she thought, and she said finally to the cats around her, "I will send a patrol out tomorrow to find their mother. They will take the kits with them. If their mother is not found, we'll leave them there. Some rogue can take care of them."

She seemed to think the matter was done, but Eagleclaw stepped forward. "No."

Acornstar turned, eyes wide with surprise and shock. "No?" she copied. "Are you trying to defy my orders?"

"Yes, I am." Slight fear was in Eagleclaw's eyes, but she forced herself to look strong. "I will not let you sentence these kits to death. They need us."

"We don't have enough prey for them! We have to focus on our own cats first!" The fury in her meow sent terror down Ravenpaw's spine, and he couldn't help but scramble over to Mossrain and hide behind his mentor. Mossrain absent-mindedly curled his tail around Ravenpaw's neck to comfort him.

"We have plenty!" Eagleclaw snarled. "We will send a patrol *without* the kits to look for the mother, but if we can't find her they will stay here."

Acornstar flicked her gaze over the medicine cats and her daughter's. "You all think this?" Goldenpool stared coldly, while Mossrain averted his gaze. He was too young to admit that he was, in fact, betraying his leader's orders and obviously couldn't manage to look into her furious gaze.

Quietly, the young medicine meowed, "We can't let any kit die, no

matter where they're from. They're already weak."

"And we need *strong* cats!" Acornstar hissed, her fur bristling along her spine. Her tail lashed through the air in fury.

"They will be strong," Goldenpool said softly. "They just need a mother to raise them."

"You already have three kits, you can't nurse two more! And with leaf-bare coming? You'll cause the death of three healthy Clanborn kits!"

In an instant, Goldenpool was out of the nest, the kits squealing as they fell backward, rolling around in confusion. Ravenpaw was terrified to see that Goldenpool, the calm, caring medicine cat, had rushed her leader and knocked her over.

"Never disrespect my kits!" Goldenpool growled, slashing her long claws over Acornstar's chest, splattering blood on the stone floor.

"Goldenpool, stop!" Mossrain leaped forward and dug his teeth into Goldenpool's neck, and Eagleclaw quickly jumped in front of her mother to stop her from attacking the medicine cat back.

Acornstar snarled, blood dripping down her face from a small cut above her eye. "Do whatever you want," she growled, turning around and stalking away. "It's not like I ever led this Clan anyway."

Looking desperate, Eagleclaw hurried after her.

There was a surprised meow out in the clearing, and a moment later Foxpounce hurried in, looking worried. "What in StarClan's name happened?"

"Just a small disagreement," Mossrain murmured, watching Goldenpool crawl back into the nest. The kits mewled, still angry with her sudden departure, but then they returned to suckling.

"That ended in claws?" Foxpounce breathed, shaking his head. "A fight between a medicine cat its leader? What is this Clan coming to?" His eyes were dull and fearful.

Mossrain sighed, flicking his tail softly. "There is nothing I can do for her anymore, she has to heal herself." For a moment Ravenpaw was confused, but then he realized Mossrain had changed the conversation and was talking about Russetdawn, who stirred weakly in the corner. But her eyes stayed closed, and she let out a soft groan.

Foxpounce's eyes shined bright with agony for a moment. Ravenpaw wondered if he would take her place to stop her from her pain. He decided the poor tom would. "I know that, Mossrain. I'm here because I have pain in my shoulder."

"For how long?" Mossrain directed the tom to seat himself in a nest next to Russetdawn and began removing the cobwebs that covered the wound.

"Since I went out today," Foxpounce admitted.

"You should have stayed in camp," Mossrain scolded the older tom like he was a kit.

"If I hadn't gone out we likely wouldn't have found the kits," the red tom said, then added a little quieter, "alive."

Mossrain gave him an irritated look. "It was still stupid. You're banned from leaving camp until I say you can."

"Yes, Mossrain," Foxpounce muttered, a little sarcastically. Mossrain grumbled something under his breath.

"Your wound is fine, just don't overwork it. I don't have the herbs to spare, after using so many on Grayblaze and Russetdawn." Hearing his name, the gray tom raised his head, looking tired, but then let it rest down again.

"Grayblaze looks better," Foxpounce commented. The injured warrior flicked an ear. "When will he be free to leave?" The tom looked up again, interested in the question.

"Two days, probably, but he'll be off patrols for a few more. I'd say a quarter moon before he can get back to his warrior duties, maybe more if an infection starts." The tom threw his head back down.

"Russetdawn is still having some troubles, and only wakes up for some moments of the day. I don't know when she'll be awake completely, but I'd estimate about half a moon before she'll be back on her normal duties."

"And what about me?" Ravenpaw flinched at the cold voice--Blossompaw was awake. And she was angry, by the sound of it. Then again, she was always angry.

"I don't know, I haven't dealt with an injury like yours," Mossrain answered honestly. "A broken spine will never heal, but I believe yours is only fractured because you can still feel and move your lower body, even if it's only barely. How is your vision, has it cleared?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Blossompaw hissed coldly.

Mossrain sighed, shaking his head, then meowed, "Blossompaw, I need to know so I can know how you're doing."

Blossompaw looked at her paws, anger radiating from her coat, before finally saying. "My eyes are fine."

The young medicine cat looked relieved. "Good, that means your eyesight is healing, at least."

"At *least?*" Blossompaw snarled, looking infuriated. "If medicine cats are so high-and-mighty, can't they heal anything? Or are you admitting you're useless?"

Ravenpaw flattened his ears, hurt at his sister's cold-hearted words. He wanted to slink into his nest to hide his shame. Why did she have to be this way?

Mossrain's eyes narrowed, while Foxpounce looked away, seemingly embarrassed. Goldenpool seemed not to notice the conflict, focused on the small kits.

"We try to do everything we can, but some wounds just can't be healed. I pray to StarClan for you to get better." Ravenpaw was scared by the lack of emotion in his mentor's tone.

"You think *StarClan* will heal my back if you mutter up to them?" the apprentice hissed, and Ravenpaw flinched at the disrespect of their ancestors.

"I wasn't talking about your back, I was talking about your personality." Mossrain stood up with a straight back and headed for the den entrance. "I'm going out to gather herbs. Ravenpaw, help Goldenpool get the kits into the nursery. Foxpounce, you're free to leave if you want."

And with that, the medicine cat left the den with bristling fur.

Question #1: What are your thoughts on the fight between Goldenpool and Acornstar?

Question #2: Do you think EchoClan should keep the kits, or give them away?

Chapter Fourteen

As Rowanpaw slowly made his way back to camp, his chest began to hurt where the fox had kicked him. There was a light trail of blood from three scratches from the creature's claws that had barely pierced his skin, but the powerful force of the blow left it hard for him to breathe the longer he walked.

It got harder and harder to walk because of the suckling mud that pulled at his fur. The rain had thickened it, making it harder to cross the murky territory. After sharp pains crossed his chest, he finally decided to take a break and crawled up onto a log with old, peeling bark that fell away under his claws.

As he rested, trying to catch his breath, he decided the fox had probably bruised his chest bones, which was why he was having trouble breathing. His legs also hurt from the long journey out of the territory and carrying the two kits back. He slowly licked the blood away from his chest, though stopped when it made him out of breath.

He waited until his chest started to feel better, but when he slid off the log and onto the mushy ground it began to burn again. Ignoring it, he continued on. He slowly got closer and closer to camp, his paws covered in wet mud that filled his claws. His ears perked and twitched as pawsteps came to his senses. He turned his head and saw a few of his Clanmates picking their way through the territory. Noticing him, they headed over, looking worried. The lead cat was Duskfang, while Leafpelt hurried behind him, and Carppaw right behind his she-cat mentor. Leafpelt held a small mouse in her jaws, holding it loosely in her teeth.

"Ratpaw? Are you okay?" It was Carppaw who spoke, looking curious. Rowanpaw eyed himself, noticing his ruffled, bloody fur and soaked chest.

"Birchsplash and I ran into a fox..." He didn't want to say too much, in case his story didn't line up with the black and white tom's.

"Great StarClan!" Leafpelt murmured through the prey, looking scared. Her eyes were wide and she flicked her gaze around like she expected the fox to leap out and attack at any moment.

"Is he okay?" Duskfang asked, "where is he?"

Leafpelt looked even more scared for a moment, and Carppaw looked terrified. They probably thought Birchsplash had been either greatly injured or killed during the attack.

"He's okay," Rowanpaw hurried to reassure his Clanmates, and they all looked relieved. "He was more injured than me, so he went ahead to camp while I stayed behind."

"Why'd you stay behind?" Carppaw asked. Rowanpaw tried to quickly think of something that Birchsplash would've likely said, to keep their stories similar, but it was unneeded.

"Rowanpaw can answer questions later, let's first get him to camp and have Sandflight check him out. I'm sure he's tired," Duskfang meowed with an understanding glance at the apprentice. Despite his normal harsh attitude, he was often nicer to younger cats--more patience for them, Rowanpaw guessed. He was almost surprised the tom didn't have kits, but then again there weren't many cats in the Clan. The only available she-cat to have kits was Juniperfur, and the two cats had never really seen eye-to-eye.

Rowanpaw felt bad for the tom but stayed silent about his thoughts. Whether Duskfang got a mate or not was his decision, and the apprentice had nothing to say in it. Clearing his mind, Rowanpaw fell in step with the other cats, walking close to Carppaw. His chest began to burn again, and the bigger apprentice pressed against him, letting Rowanpaw use his friend's shoulder to help himself walk.

"Thanks," he muttered quietly, his pride injured. But he still accepted help when he knew he needed it. It wasn't far to camp, and soon the warriors were leaping up the rocks, claws scraping against stone.

"Need help?" Carppaw asked, stepping away. Rowanpaw shook his head, gesturing for Carppaw to go first. "I'll go after," he said.

Rowanpaw knew the other apprentice wanted to make sure he didn't fall and tried to be grateful to the fact, but it was hard, wondering if Carppaw thought he was too weak. Sighing, Rowanpaw pushed off from the mushy ground, gasping for breath as he landed on the first rock. He stood there, head down as he panted for a moment. "Are you okay, Ratpaw?" Carppaw called. Nodding, Rowanpaw forced himself to go the rest of the way up, groaning as his chest closed on itself.

Finally, he pulled himself over the edge and stood on solid ground. The clearing was full of cats, and as he stumbled down the rock the warriors crowded around him. "Birchsplash said you two fought a fox off the territory!" Frondpaw mewed excitedly, shoving through the small crowd. Cats grumbled in complaint but still looked expectantly at Rowanpaw for his answer.

Rowanpaw began to answer hesitantly, but then a small brown shape slipped through the legs of Bloomcloud. "Birchsplash said you killed it!" she squealed. "And you tried to find more, did you, did you? Did you kill a second one?"

"Uh, no..." Rowanpaw felt strong relief for his little sister, having her tell him more of the story Birchsplash had made up. "I didn't find anymore, but we did kill that one on the territory." *So the Clan doesn't know we willing left the territory.*

"I'm glad you're safe," a strong voice said from the back of the crowd, and the cats parted to let Dawnstar go through. She nodded her thanks to her warriors before stopping before the apprentice. Anxiety went through him at his leader's proud gaze. "Not many cats have killed foxes, and even fewer to get away unwounded."

"I hurt my chest," Rowanpaw murmured softly, wondering if the tightness in his breath was from the injury or the praise from Dawnstar. A few warriors murmured about his bravery.

"Maybe Ratclaw for a warrior name," Brackenfoot suggested quietly to Brownear, who shrugged.

"Perhaps Ratfang? Birchsplash said Ratpaw killed the fox with a bite to its scruff, and that must take some strength." Leafpelt, who had

padded over to her mate, nodded her agreement.

Dawnstar let out a snort, watching the warriors. They soon noticed their leader's stare and quieted themselves. Rowanpaw still felt fear rushing him. Why were they thinking about warrior names? He was barely two moons into his apprenticeship! He likely had four moons of training left, according to Hazelfur. And what if he did get one of those names? He liked both ending parts, but not the first. He couldn't be a respectable warrior with a name that started with 'Rat'.

Or respectable leader, he thought with small excitement. He couldn't help to enjoy the thought, like many other apprentices, of becoming the leader of his Clan one day. *Can I lead a Clan in a territory I hate?* He was disturbed by the thought and decided to focus on Dawnstar, who had turned back to him.

"Ignore the warriors, for I will be picking your name. I believe I already have one in mind, in fact." Her tail flicked absent-mindedly. "But nevermind that. Go see Sandflight, so she can help you with your chest."

Dipping his head deeply, Rowanpaw slipped through the warriors and headed along the side of the camp wall to the small medicine cat's den across from the apprentices' den and near the camp entrance. Entering the den, a weak smell of herb filled his scent glands. Birchsplash lay in a nest, cobwebs plastered on his wounds. He looked over as Rowanpaw entered. Excitement filled his gaze, and he looked anxiously to where Sandflight was searching for herbs in her meager storage. Birchsplash obviously wanted to ask about the kits, but not in front of the medicine cat.

"Ratpaw, good, you're back!" Sandflight meowed, turning around. She set down the herbs in her claws and padded over to a nest made of dry bracken. "Come lay down. I don't know why you decided it would be a good idea to wait around for more foxes to arrive. You're lucky none did, or we would be welcoming you to StarClan right now! Apprentices these days!" Rowanpaw ignored the she-cat's grumbles and lay down feeling the uncomfortable nest crackle under him, jabbing into his side. "Sorry, I used my best bedding for Birchsplash. You'll have to do for the reject stuff until I

can get better nest materials."

"Maybe the other apprentices and I could find some stuff for you," Rowanpaw offered, feeling bad for the she-cat. She was probably pretty stressed after the kitting today. "How is Rainsong doing?"

Sandflight's mood seemed to deflate, and she looked down in sadness. "Badly. She's depressed after losing two kits, but Flintkit seems strong. I gave her and Ashbreeze the last of my borage so their milk will come easier. Ashbreeze's kits are ready to give up milk, but it seems it's easier to feed them that then prey when we have so little. It's taking a lot of Ashbreeze's strength, though. And I gave Rainsong some so that Flintkit would be as strong as possible." Sandflight seemed relieved to clear her chest.

"Is Fernkit helping at all?" Rowanpaw wondered if his sister, who often came into the den, was useful to have around for the older medicine cat.

"Definitely," Sandflight replied with a sigh. "She's been helping me by going through my herbs and helping with minor injuries. She already knows the simpler herbs and is extremely excited to learn. About two and a half moons until she can be officially apprenticed, then I can take her to the Moonstream to see if StarClan will accept her."

"You think StarClan won't?" Rowanpaw asked as the she-cat began to look at his chest, eying the blood that continued to softly leak from the wound.

"Perhaps, since she's half-rogue, half-traitor," a soft growl escaped Sandflight's throat, but she quickly swallowed it. "Aspenheart is a complete loner in the Clan, no cat will talk to her except the cats she brought with her. Even Leafpelt, who used to be her best friend, won't talk to her. When was the last time you saw her on a patrol?"

"I try not to pay attention to her," Rowanpaw meowed in response, then added softly, "so far, I don't think she's gone on *any* patrol. Clovertail has yet to call her name in the morning for hunting or patrolling the border. She rises early and hunts all day, but has barely anything to show for it when she returns at sundown. I don't

know why Dawnstar even let her join the Clan again."

"I agree, but we got some good cats from her. I don't like to admit it, but Hawktail is a good hunter and has proved himself a good fighter in practice sessions. He has helped our Clan since he arrived."

"He may be helpful, but *she* is not. Aspenheart has done nothing to help our Clan!" A growl escaped him.

"Will you stop?" Birchsplash snarled from his nest, and Sandflight and Rowanpaw turned to face him, surprised. It seemed that both of them had forgotten Birchsplash was there. "You two may not care about Aspenheart, but *I* do. She was my mentor and my friend. She still is. Don't forget she gave you life, Ratpaw. Without her, you wouldn't exist. She regrets leaving her Clan, but if she hadn't we would've never gotten Fernkit, Meadowkit, and Primkit. We would've have gotten *any* of the Twolegplace cats, in fact."

"That doesn't mean I have to like her!" Rowanpaw hissed. He had gained trust and respect for Birchsplash throughout the day, after fighting the fox and saving the kits with him, but the tom still believed Aspenheart was a good cat, and it infuriated him. Why did he still protect her? He thought of Emberheart for a moment and Hazelfur. Both had been his mentors, and he cared for them both deeply. Even if Birchsplash had the same connection, how could he trust a cat who willing left their Clan with no good reason?

Is my reason good enough? he asked himself. All the Twolegplace cats, along with Birchsplash, Emberheart, and Hazelfur knew he would leave the Clan if he was unable to receive the new name he wanted. Perhaps it was kittish to leave his home because of his personal thoughts, but he wouldn't, *couldn't,* live with "Rat" as his name. It would hang over him for the rest of his life. He would rather be called Rowan as a rogue than Rat as a warrior. Whether it was Ratclaw or Ratfang or Ratstar, he would never take the name. He wanted Rowanclaw or Rowanfang... Or Rowanstar...

"Give her a chance, Ro--" Birchsplash stopped himself with a small cough, then restarted. "Give her a chance, Ratpaw. She's your mother, after all," the tom pleaded softly.

"She's *never* been my mother!" Rowanpaw hissed, fur fluffing.

"Enough!" Sandflight snapped. "You two can fight later, I'm done talking about this."

Rowanpaw snorted coldly, curling his claws into the dry, hard nest. In his anger, his breath got faster, and his chest began to close up again. Losing breath, he coughed to try to clear his throat, but it just made it worse, and he wheezed, dropping his head. Quickly, Sandflight touched a paw to his chest, and he flinched away, pain flooding him at the point she touched.

"Must be bruised," she muttered, flicking her tail. Rowanpaw nodded softly, having guessed as much. Sandflight went over to her storage and brought back some leaves and round yellow flowers. She dropped the flowers in front of him and meowed around the leaves in her jaws, "chew and swallow them. Don't whine about the taste or I'll hit you over the ear." She began to chew the leaves up.

Rowanpaw licked the flowers from the stone floor and began to chew, but as the flavor leaked into his throat he found it was sharp and heavy. He couldn't help but gag, and, true to her word, Sandflight sent a swift paw over his head, giving him a small ring for a moment. He shook it away and forced himself to swallow the herbs she had given him.

As the moments past by of Sandflight chewing silently, Rowanpaw felt his chest loosen, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Sandflight spat the pulp she was chewing on her paw and began to rub it into the wound on his chest. It stung slightly, but soon it soothed the small burning he hadn't realized he had. "I'm going to report to Dawnstar real quick, don't fight or no more wounds will be treated for the next three moons for you two!" The medicine cat got to her paws and hurried from the den.

Rowanpaw looked at his mud-stained paws, still angered at Birchsplash for his words. The tom *knew* Rowanpaw would never forgive Aspenheart, so why was he still pushing?

"I'm sorry."

Rowanpaw was surprised by the black and white tom's words, and looked over silently, eyes wide as he waited for the tom to continue. Birchsplash looked embarrassed for a moment, then forced himself to say, "I know you wo--*can't* trust Aspenheart again. I'm sorry for fighting with you." He was silent for a few heartbeats, then added, "what happened to the kits?"

"An EchoClan patrol found them," Rowanpaw muttered in reply. "A warrior and two apprentices. I think one of them was the medicine cat apprentice." He remembered the small black tom from the Gathering. "They treated him like a medicine cat, either way. They took the kits with them." He hadn't been able to hear the cats' conversation very well, for they spoke quietly and quickly to not alarm the kits. "They'll be well taken care of, I'm sure of it."

"I'm sure of it, too," Birchsplash agreed, nodding his head. The cats fell into a comfortable silence, their earlier argument forgotten--mostly, anyway. Rowanpaw was still a little upset and knew Birchsplash would have to gain back the respect and trust he had lost. And that would take more than a simple apology.

Then, pawsteps sounded at the den entrance, and a light ginger head popped in, yellow eyes scanning the den.

"Emberheart!" Rowanpaw mewled in excitement, flicking his tail. Emberheart purred softly, entering the den. Rowanpaw hadn't seen her standing recently, and noticed how her belly had enlargened in the past few days until it looked like it was incredibly bloated. Though she was heavy with kits, the apprentice knew her haunches were too skinny, and she was likely having a hard time holding up her own weight.

"You two look like fox dung," she commented lovingly, nuzzling each of them in turn. Rowanpaw felt calmed by her warm, milky scent. It still sent shocks through him when he thought of her as a soon-to-be-mother.

She'll do great, he decided to himself.

"I feel like it," Birchsplash answered humorously, rolling his shoulders softly, but then he winched in pain at the movement.

Emberheart rolled her eyes.

"Can't you go one moment without hurting yourself? Honestly, you behave like a kit!" Though her tone was scolding, it also had a caring note that showed she was joking with her littermate. Rowanpaw thought it was rather true, though. Birchsplash had shown the strength and the heart of a warrior when he decided to leave the territory to hunt, and when he was fighting the fox, but now that he was lying in a nest he looked small and soft.

"Well, I guess I should rejoin the nursery again," Birchsplash muttered. "It *was* a lot simpler back then. And I'd get to spend more time with my future kin, once they're born." He blinked fondly at her stomach. "How long until they arrive?"

Emberheart shrugged unknowingly. "She's not completely sure. Originally she said in about a quarter moon, but with Rainsong's early kitting she thinks it might be a few days earlier."

"So any day now?" Rowanpaw mewled hopefully. He couldn't wait to see the little kits, watching them grow up. He remembered the names Emberheart and Heronclaw had thought of for their kits; his favorites had been Hopekit, Ryekit, and Lionkit. The name Hopekit sparked something in his chest, just like Emberheart wanted; she wanted the Clan to look at the cat who held the name and think of a bright future ahead of them.

"She thinks so," Emberheart replied with excitement and fear in her mew. Then she shook her head to clear her thoughts. "I came to ask if you two needed anything. Prey, a special visitor...?" She let the question hang out in the air.

"I wouldn't mind seeing Clovertail, and maybe something to eat if we have something available," Birchsplash meowed softly.

"I'd share a piece of prey with Birchsplash," Rowanpaw meowed. "And perhaps if Blazepaw isn't busy..."

Emberheart purred. "He's been anxious to see you. Clovertail is out on a hunting patrol, but Blazepaw just returned to camp right after you got back. I'll find something for you two to share and send it

with Blazepaw." She touched noses with Birchsplash in apology about their mother being out of camp, then left the den on unsteady paws.

Rowanpaw waited, claws digging into his tempory nest until he heard his brother's familiar heavy pawsteps, and he hurried into the den. He had a small rat in his jaws and dropped it in front of the two nests. "You're okay! I thought you'd be covered in blood and scratches!" He nudged his brother a few times to check his coat for any marks. "The Clan says you killed a fox, all by yourself!"

Rowanpaw rolled his eyes. He couldn't believe how quick truthful stories spread into lies. "Yes, I killed it, but Birchsplash is the real hero, he did most of the fighting and got most of the scars. The Clan should be celebrating *his* name."

"No, they should be celebrating *yours,*" Birchsplash responded. He looked curiously at Blazepaw. "Does he know about... You know?"

Rowanpaw sighed. "My true name? Yes, he does, since we were kits. And that wasn't exactly smooth. If you were trying to ask discreetly, you failed. Badly."

Birchsplash flattened his ears and licked his chest a few times, looking embarrassed. But after he calmed himself down he looked up again. "Anyway, you need the Clan on your side, so making you seem like the hero is the best option."

"Are they not on my side already?" Rowanpaw felt fear flash through him. Did his Clanmates not trust him?

"That's not what I meant," Birchsplash soothed his anger with a soft meow. "When you tell Dawnstar you want to change your name, you need your Clanmates behind you. What better way than becoming respected by the older warriors? Only a few cats can claim they killed a fox, and almost none have ever been an apprentice."

Rowanpaw forced himself to nod his understanding, but couldn't say anything else because Sandflight padded into the den. Seeing the calmed fur, she meowed, "You two getting along again? Good.

Thank you for the prey, Blazepaw, but I want the den clear. I'll separate the prey for these two."

With a respectful dip of his head, Blazepaw retreated from the den, casting a longing look at his brother before he entered the clearing. Rowanpaw watched him until he left the camp with three other cats, already going on another patrol. Then he let his head rest on his paws, bored and tired. The pain in his chest was easing, and he felt compelled to go out and help his Clan, going on patrol and hunting anything he could.

Sandflight seemed to sense his need, and meowed, "You're staying here until tomorrow, so don't even think about it." She sat a small black seed before his uncomfortable nest. "Take this, it will help you sleep. When you wake tomorrow, you can see if you're feeling better."

"I don't need to sleep," Rowanpaw muttered quietly but took the seed either way, not convinced it would truly help. But soon after he licked them up, his mind became fuzzy, and he soon found himself drifting in and out of sleep. Why was he just lying here like a weak kit, instead of helping his Clan? He thought about asking Sandflight but found himself too tired to do so. Letting out a grateful sigh, Rowanpaw fell into the deepest sleep he had felt since before his brother was almost killed. With that on his mind, he couldn't stop himself from remembering the day he had experienced as his mind closed on the outside world.

The sun was slowly creeping down the sky, sending streaks over young Rowankit's fur. He was sitting in front of the nursery with his tail curled around his small paws, amber eyes wide as he watched the Clan entrance. Next to him, Blazekit was trying to calm his kit fluff, though his brown gaze was distracted by his flicking tail tip. He suddenly launched at it, and Rowankit couldn't help but notice his brother's ribs.

The Clan was having a hard time with prey recently, with most cats still distracted by the sad loss of Sparkkit. A pang went through his heart as he remembered his dear friend, alive only a quarter moon ago. I should've never went into the forest, *he thought, digging his claws into the ground. If he had never dragged her into the forest, she would still be alive and would be experiencing her apprenticeship with her littermates,*

who had just received their new names that sunrise.

Rowankit had hated watching the two kits receive their names, knowing Sparkkit was up in StarClan, watching down with the name she would keep for the rest of time. She would never get "paw" in her name, and would never become a warrior of BatClan. Anger flooded the small tom, with Dawnstar's ceremonious words flooding him. And that was why he was waiting.

His tail flicked, and his claws began to hurt. He forced them from the ground, still glancing at the camp entrance. Rowankit heard the dry ferns that were slowing dying in front of the nursery get brushed aside, and a soft muzzle touched his head. Bloomcloud's calming scent filled him, and he took a deep whiff. Then fear flooded him. Bloomcloud's litter was now apprenticed, so would he and Blazepaw be left alone in the nursery, to sleep cold and alone?

Once again, anger and sadness filled him as he wondered why his mother left. He knew he shouldn't be sad about it, but his tiny kit heart was full of grief and longing for his mother. Bloomcloud was the closest thing he had known to a mother for the past three moons, and every part of him wished his real mother was there for him, so they wouldn't be alone for two more moons.

"Don't look so afraid, Ratkit," Bloomcloud murmured, giving him a soft lick on his head. Blazekit looked over, having not noticed the she-cat. He looked surprised at the thought of his brother being scared.

Quickly, Rowankit puffed out his chest and meowed, "I'm not scared of nothing!"

"'Anything,'" Bloomcloud corrected softly. Rowankit tilted his head, confused. Sighing with an amused shake of her head, she explained, "'I'm not scared of anything,'"

Rowankit looked down, angry Bloomcloud had to correct his speech. Blazekit, in the silence, mewed softly to change the subject, "Since Frondpaw and Carppaw are apprentices, you'll be going back to the warriors' den, aren't you?"

Bloomcloud purred softly, nuzzling him lovingly. "I still have two more

kits to take care of, don't I? The Clan will have to wait."

While Blazekit mewled excitedly, tail rising into the air, Rowankit felt anger fill him. He didn't understand it. He had just wanted Bloomcloud to stay, didn't he? No, he didn't. He just thought he did. He didn't want a fake mother, he wanted his real one. And Bloomcloud could never *replace her. "No!" he cried.*

The camp was mostly empty, but the elder Lakeshine looked over, along with the warrior Brackenfoot, who was left behind from patrols to guard the camp. Bloomcloud tilted her head much like he had before. "No?" she copied, curious about what he meant.

"We don't need you!" he growled at the she-cat, and shock went through her eyes. "You're not our mother, so don't act like it! Our mother will come back, so don't try to replace her! Aspenheart will return to us!" She had to, and he had to believe it. Rowankit was her child, her offspring, as was Blazekit. She wouldn't *abandon them. She had left for a secret mission, and she would return soon, to be with him when he was made an apprentice like Bloomcloud was with her own kits.*

He still pictured the way Bloomcloud had nuzzled both Frondpaw and Carppaw before they left the camp with their new mentors, Duskfang and Leafpelt. He wanted Aspenheart there to do the same for him, to congratulate him for growing up. She *will* be there, *he told himself. Looking at Bloomcloud, he saw the sad look there and felt anger fill him.*

"Oh, Ratkit..." she murmured. "You must realize Aspenheart isn't going to return?"

Rowankit felt his fur fluff. Yes, his mother had made one big mistake, giving him the name Ratkit, but he would forgive her for that soon. When she came back, he would ask her to change it, and as his mother she would say yes. She would love him enough to know he hated the name...

It was the day after Sparkkit's death he decided to go by Rowankit, but he was smart enough to know the Clan wouldn't accept it unless they respected him or his mother or father allowed it. And no one knew who his father was. So, after Aspenheart righted her wrong, everything would be okay. She just had to come back first. And it upset him that

Bloomcloud believed she wouldn't.

"She wouldn't just abandon us!" Rowankit growled. He whipped his head to look at his brother. "You believe she'll come back for us, don't you?"

Blazekit held his gaze for only a moment before looking at his paws. "We don't why she left..." he muttered finally.

Rowankit didn't know if that meant Blazekit was with him or against him. Lips curling, Rowankit decided he was done with waiting. Whipping around, he hissed, "Come on, Blazekit, it's time."

"Time for what?" Bloomcloud asked as Blazekit hurried after his brother.

"To say goodbye," he hissed under his breath, jumping up the rocky pathway from the camp.

"Hey! Ratkit, Blazekit, get back here!" Bloomcloud raced across the clearing, jumping up the rocks to step in front of them. "You're not allowed to leave camp."

"I don't care." Rowankit slipped past the queen and, before she could grab him, jumped from the camp. He looked up to see Blazekit hesitating. His ears flattened in sadness and fear. "Are you coming?" he called.

Bloomcloud laid a tail on Blazekit. "Don't you dare," she said sternly, then looked back at the ground. "Ratkit, get back up here!"

"No!" he hissed. "You want to take care of me, then come with! But I'm going with or without you, no matter what!" Tail high, he ignored the suckling mud and padded away in a direction he knew too well. After a few moments, he heard heavy pawsteps hit the ground, followed by smaller ones. Both Bloomcloud and Blazekit were following. His brother hurried to his side, pressing against him. Rowankit was a little upset Blazekit had hesitated to follow, but at least he was here now.

But the three hadn't been traveling for long when quick paws sounded behind them, and Emberheart suddenly appeared, looking tired. She was panting, her sides heaving, but she forced herself to get her breathing under control. "Ratkit! You didn't wait for me!"

Bloomcloud's eyes widened with surprise. "You knew he was coming out here?"

Emberheart's head dropped in defeat. "Yes. He told me he was going to, and I convinced him to let me come with because I knew he would find a way to get out here." She looked at Bloomcloud with an apologetic look. "Brackenfoot told me what happened in the clearing. I got back right after you left. Go back home, I'll take him like I said I would."

"What is he planning on doing?" Bloomcloud looked uncertain about leaving the kits.

Eyes shining with worry, Emberheart moved forward and whispered in the she-cat's ear. Bloomcloud's eyes widened in surprise, and she looked at Rowankit with shock. He stared back coldly, and after a moment the tortoiseshell stumbled off, looking lost. "Come on, let's go." Emberheart nodded forward.

Rowankit nodded and continued. He had only spoken to Emberheart twice since he lost his best friend; once the day after when she asked how he was doing, and just the day before when he told her of his plan. She still seemed uncertain, and he wondered how much she had told Bloomcloud. He decided it didn't matter.

Pretty soon, they reached their destination. Sadness flooded him as he gazed at the hollow log sitting in the mud, moss growing on the side of the wood. It was the place Sparkkit had taken her last breath, and where Rowankit knew he would feel most connected to her. He slowly stepped forward, and Emberheart stayed back as Blazekit followed his brother. He stood at the entrance of the log with shaking legs, looking scared.

Taking a deep breath, he began: "Sparkkit, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Because of me, you lost your life, and I will always regret it. You would've made a great warrior. You didn't deserve to die so young, and I wish it could've been me instead. But it wasn't me, and I will try to live with that. Perhaps, one day, you can be as proud of me as I am of you."

He dropped his head, his heart as heavy as stone. Agony filled every bone in his body, and he felt like he was going to drop.

"Ratkit, Blazekit, we need to go."

Rowankit was saddened by Emberheart's mew. He was too sad to fight, but he still hesitated.

"Come on!" *Emberheart growled, suddenly fierce. And then, Rowankit understood why. A scent came to him, faint but still there. It was disgusting, sharp and musky.*

"What is that?" he knew it was bad, and there was a familiarity to the scent that he once caught on a few warriors.

Emberheart didn't get to answer, for, suddenly, a huge russet creature leaped from a clump of bracken upwind, which explained the faintness of the scent. The monster charged at them, paws throwing up mud.

"Fox!" Emberheart screeched, running at the kits. Terrified, Rowankit leaped into the hollow base of the log, but before Blazekit could follow the fox had grabbed him, pinning him to the ground and digging its teeth into his neck. Blazekit's screech was like horror to Rowankit's ears, and he remembered the terrible moment that Sparkkit fell from the tree. He had already almost lost his brother, and now his brother's life was under threat again, because of him.

Suddenly, a ginger form rammed the fox away, and Blazekit cried in fear. Rowankit was frozen in shock for a moment, watching Emberheart slash at the fox's nose, forcing it back. Clearing his head, Rowankit grabbed his brother by his back, not touching his bleeding scruff, and pulled him into the same place Sparkkit had died just a quarter moon ago.

For a moment, Rowankit thought he could still smell her. Emberheart reappeared, forced back by the fox. It yapped and snapped at the she-cat, but she continued to avoid its sharp teeth and lashed out without fear.

Time seemed to slow for Rowankit. All he could think about was Aspenheart. Why wasn't she *here? Why wasn't she here to save them? Why was this warrior, one who barely knew Blazekit and Rowankit, protecting them with her life, while his mother was off in the wind? Bloomcloud's voice came back to him:* You must realize Aspenheart isn't going to return?

Before, he had believed she would. But now, watching the cat he saw as almost a stranger fight to save his brother's life, he realized that Aspenheart hadn't just left him, she abandoned *him. She* abandoned *him and their Clan. He suddenly didn't want Aspenheart to return. She... She was nothing. She had never fought to save his life, but Emberheart had. She was still yowling angrily and attacking the fox with strength, while Aspenheart was hiding alone, scared of living Clan life.*

Aspenheart wasn't, and never would be, his mother. But neither was Bloomcloud, nor Emberheart. He didn't have a mother, and he didn't need *one. He just needed his brother, and now Emberheart as a friend, and perhaps as a sister. No littermate had failed him yet... And a part of him knew they never would.*

Question #1: What are your thoughts of Rowanpaw's second dream about his kithood?

Question #2: Did your heart break too when you realized how much Aspenheart broke this poor kit????

Question #3: Do you think Rowanpaw is too harsh on his mother? Do you think he should give her another chance?

Also, please remember that even if you're reading this a year after it's posted, don't be afraid to answer the questions! I'm always excited to know what you guys are saying, so don't be a ghost reader! Even if you don't want to comment, leave a vote so I at least know you're there! Thanks!

Chapter Fifteen

"This den is much too crowded!" Alder pushed his little paws against Bat's back, letting them sink into his father's thick coat. "I want more room!" he cried.

"Stop whining," Sage growled, but the young tomkit continued to whimper and mewl in disagreement.

"Sage, he's a kit," Bat warned her softly, eyes glowing in the darkness. "And he's not wrong. Flint and Smoke have been sleeping outside the den, and look at poor Creek." He nodded to the she-cat, who was curled at the entrance, fur ruffled and body tight to not take up room.

"Then she can go back to her own den," the silver tabby grumbled, shifting her body weight. Crow and Ash were curled against her stomach, with Alder right next to them--he began to close his eyes and fall asleep again--but Echo had refused to sleep next to her mother, and instead was tucked against Bat's chest, little nose twitching.

Ravenpaw watched the tiny version of the first leader of his Clan. He was awkwardly sitting right in front of Creek, his tail draped inside of her body and his front paws through Bat's front legs. It was strange, being there but yet not at the same time. He felt bad for little Echo, who obviously was overwhelmed by her mother. Knowing that, someday, she would be leader of his Clan, he wondered when her transition from a tiny, defenseless kit to a great, wise warrior would begin to take place.

"All three of them are helping us," Bat argued quietly. "Flint and Smoke help me hunt, and Creek helps you with the kits."

"You're a perfectly fine hunter by yourself! The only reason we need their extra prey is that they *eat it themselves," Sage hissed back quietly.*

"And what if one of the kits catches a cold? Do you *know how to treat it?" Bat shot back, eyes glowing in the darkness. It was clear he was*

trying to remain calm, but his mate was making it hard to do so. Ravenpaw wondered how they fell in love, when they seemed so different. How did Bat, a loner, become so close with a pampered kittypet, that obviously had no skills for the outside world.

She must get better in the future, *Ravenpaw thought,* if she was the leader of a Clan alongside her daughter, son, and mate. *A sudden shiver went through him. If they were all family, parents, and kits, why did they separate? It would be strange being in a different Clan than his siblings, mother, and father, so why did these cats choose to go their separate ways? He burned to know more of the future. Or, more correctly, more of the past.*

Sage let out a quiet grumble. "What did you say?" Bat meowed, sounding a little calmer.

Surprisingly, the mother let out a light growl, and Bat flattened his ears in shock. "I said, I should've stayed with my Twolegs."

Bat let out a soft mewl, sounding just like one of his little kits. His eyes were full of distress. "You would lose our kits, Sage, if you stayed with them."

"At least they'd be safe, and they'd have room."

"They are *safe," Bat told her softly. "I'm one of the best fighters in the forest, and I've taught Flint, Smoke, and Creek everything I know. And if you want more room, there are plenty of dens to choose from, all of those safe as well. I told you the first day you came here that this den was temporary because it was so small. We can always move to Creek's den by the river, or one on the moor, in the dense forest, even in the marshland. Anywhere you and the kits want to go, I will follow. So will Creek and her kits."*

Sage was quiet for a few moments, eyes unreadable. Finally, she nodded. "Okay, Bat, I trust you. But we must wait until the kits are bigger, they're much too small to travel far. Especially Echo." The she-cat suddenly sighed, sounding utterly lost and sad. "Oh, Bat, how will she ever survive? I used to know a blind cat. He could originally see, but he lost his sight after getting attacked by an evil dog that lived next to him. He was never the same again, and couldn't do a thing by himself. If a

blind cat is useless in a housefolk den, how will one survive in the wild? Perhaps we should give her to my housefolk, so she can be taken care of better."

"Never," Bat responded immediately, sounding disgusted at the thought. Sage looked slightly offended. "She's not going to become a kittypet. She'll be perfectly fine, you just can't treat her like a kit. I've met plenty of cats who are half-blind and survive fine. And I've heard of other cats that are completely blind that have no trouble hunting and even fighting. In fact, being blind sharpens their senses, to the point they may see more than those with sight. She needs to be treated just like her littermates. If you treat her differently, or like she is defenseless, she will just despise you for it. If anything, treat her as if she's stronger than her littermates."

"But she's not!*" Sage cried, trying to keep her voice down. "We have to protect her!"*

Bat let out a soft sigh, and just mewed softly, "we can talk more about this tomorrow. Sleep now." He rested his head down, putting it close to little Echo. Ravenpaw was surprised he hadn't noticed--her sightless gray eyes were open. She had been awake and was listening to the entire thing. Sadness pinched his heart as his vision faded.

Dead-Echo did not visit him, and allowed him to wake up peacefully.

Pale sunlight shined into the den, revealing it was early dawn. The dawn patrol had likely left, but probably not long ago. Raising his head up, Ravenpaw blinked his eyes to clear his vision. Mossrain's nest was empty but still warm. The apprentice spotted herbs sitting outside the store and guessed his mentor had gone herb hunting. Gazing around the den, he spotted the three other cats sleeping.

Blossompaw's side was moving slowly but soundly, her body stretched out and looking small; Grayblaze was curled in a ball, his thick fur parted from cobwebs along his stomach, where his worst wound was. His leg was stretched out behind him, and Ravenpaw remembered seeing the twisted limb when he first came in after the battle.

Shaking his fur out, he looked at Russetdawn, and fear flooded him. The she-cat was breathing heavy, and her mouth was open as she

struggled to get a breath. Ravenpaw went over, sniffing her body. Her fur was matted with dried blood, since her wounds continued to bleed randomly, and the cobwebs coating her fur were beginning to go dark. He smelled fresh blood underneath, and knew the wounds had reopened, probably after Mossrain had left.

Part of him wanted to go get Goldenpool, but he knew she would be sleeping. Mossrain had taught him to replaster cobwebs, just the day before when Russetdawn moved and broke the covering. Feeling anxiety rise in him, he hurried to the storage and grabbed as many cobwebs as he could. After dropping them off at the nest, he cleaned his paws in the pool, shivering at the feeling of the water. Licking the fur dry with his tongue, he took a few licks from the pool afterward then hurried to his patient.

Sitting down next to her, he got some cobwebs ready on one of his paws, then got ready to peel the used cobwebs away. But, he paused. Before he put on the new cobwebs, he would clean the wound of blood until it stopped leaking, and so he should probably put some herbs on it. Maybe a poultice of marigold and goldenrod. They were the simplest herbs to learn, and some of the first he mastered. Marigold helped stop infections before they set in, while goldenrod would help heal the wound.

He noticed the blood began to sink out of the cobwebs around her neck and hurried to grab his desired herbs. They were already set out, and he knew Mossrain must be out trying to find more since both piles were low. But he knew Russetdawn needed them, and there were always other herbs for other cats.

Going back to Russetdawn, he set the herbs down, covered one paw with cobwebs again, then peeled away the neck covering. Instantly, blood spluttered from the wound and began to leak down her fur. Filled with anxiety, he quickly began to lick the wound, ignoring the bad taste of blood. Russetdawn flinched when his tongue flicked over her open flesh. "Sorry," he mumbled softly, and noticed her paws twitch, as if she was trying to answer. He moved his tongue more softly, using the tip because he knew the rest was rough and could hurt her wound more than help.

Fur had matted down and was stuck against the wound, and he did

his best to flatten it away. Russetdawn, who had probably been bothered by the fur, let out a soft sigh and shuddered deeper into the nest, her body going loose. She had been in pain and was now relaxing. Feeling better, he continued to lick softly until the blood stopped seeping against his tongue.

He softly put the cobweb bundle over the wound, holding it still with his paw. Then he began to chew a small amount of the two herbs together. Once it was in a proper pulp, he removed the cobwebs and began to lick the chewed herbs into the wound. Russetdawn tensed for a moment then relaxed into the moss.

While spreading the herbs, he used his paws to spread out a bit of the cobweb, then removed his tongue and covered the wound. He made it was down tight, then moved onto the large scratch down her side. It was much too long to do all at once, so he kept half of it covered and worked on the open part.

He stopped the blood quickly then chewed the herbs, and once he was done spreading them that part of the wound was covered as well, save for a small bit where the other cobwebs were. When he removed them, he licked a bit of the earlier poultice did his best to ignore the taste, as he did when chewing it up.

Now used to the taste of blood and herb, he finished the rest of the wound quickly and covered it up. The last wound was on her stomach, near her chest. It wasn't that long, but it was thick and deep. But before he could remove the cobwebs, he heard pawsteps and turned to see Mossrain walking into the den, his jaws full of both marigold and goldenrod.

For some reason, fear filled him. What if he had done something wrong. The look in Mossrain's eyes didn't help. The young tom dropped his herbs and hurried forward, looking worried. "What's going on?"

"Russetdawn was breathing heavy, and the wounds were bleeding again. You weren't here, and I knew Goldenpool would still be sleeping..."

Mossrain looked thoughtful, but also a little angry.

"I'm sorry, Mossrain, I won't do it again." He dropped his head, ears flattening. He heard his mentor sigh, and looked up slightly to see sadness in the gray tom's gaze.

"Don't be sorry. I just want you to be sure that you know what you're doing before you try something by yourself."

"I did!" Ravenpaw mewed quickly, and Mossrain tilted his head, curious. Ravenpaw decided to continue, to calm his mentor. "We did it yesterday, remember? I got cobwebs and herbs beforehand, then cleaned the wound. I covered it with cobwebs while I chewed the herbs, then spread the pulp over the wound before covering it again. I made sure I did it correctly."

Mossrain looked conflicted and gazed over the she-cat. "That's normally the right remedy, but what if the problem was something else? You said she was breathing heavy, and the cobwebs were getting bloody? Was she tensed?"

Ravenpaw nodded quickly. "I didn't notice at first, but after I started cleaning the wound she relaxed."

Mossrain nodded slowly. "The wounds were probably paining her. You should've checked for tense muscles before cleaning the wounds, but you did the right thing. We can't leave a cat in pain, especially one as injured as Russetdawn. You did good, but make sure your completely correct before starting with herbs, because it could've been an early sign of an infection if it was just bleeding. If it was infected, she'd be too weak to tense her muscles."

Ravenpaw nodded quickly. "Yes, Mossrain. I understand."

Sighing and nodding lightly, Mossrain meowed, "I found some borage in the forest. Bring some to the nursery for Goldenpool to eat when she wakes. Her kits are still nursing, and we haven't had the other two long enough to know yet. But I'm sure that for the next few days they'll nurse to get strength, even if they're on prey right now."

Nodding again, Ravenpaw nosed through the new herbs, feeling drawn into their scents. Clearing his mind, he focused on the hairy

leaves of borage and picked up some of the leaves, then he left the den. Outside, the clearing was empty, as it was too early for any cat to be awake. He did notice Maskdapple guarding the forest camp entrance, looking around with eyes like a hawk. As normal during the day, the moorland entrance didn't have a guard, as it was easy to see out across the land from the forest entrance. During the night, though, both sides had guards for protection.

He was surrounded by the milky scent of the nursery as he entered the small den, and he was surprised to see that Goldenpool was actually awake, staring at the two new kits that were curled up with her own, their bright ginger coats standing out against the brown and golden of her own kits.

But one of them, the tom, had dull fur, and his body almost seemed smaller than the day before when the Clan rescued them. Goldenpool looked up, sadness flooding her gaze. Dropping the borage, a scent filled his nose. He was terrified as he recognized the scent from when he lost poor Berrywhisker--the scent of death.

The strange tomkit wasn't just small--he was dead.

Quietly, Ravenpaw stumbled forward, looking down at the small body with obvious fear and depression.

"I woke up and found him dead," Goldenpool whispered softly, her mew full of regret. "I couldn't move because I didn't want to wake the other kits. I hoped some cat would come in before they woke to remove the body. I didn't want his sister to wake up and see him dead... It's most likely that she'll forget her past pretty soon, being so young. But seeing the death of her brother, that will remain in her mind forever, no matter how young she is."

Ravenpaw was frozen for a moment, feeling weak. "Does that mean she won't remember her real mother?" He asked quietly.

Goldenpool flicked her ear softly as a way to say she didn't know. "It's possible, she might start to believe I'm her real mother. And I'll treat her as my own, no matter what happens."

"So we can't ask about her real mother, about where she is?"

Ravenpaw whispered, trying to get the dead kit out of his mind, but yet his gaze was still locked on the dead, cold body.

"If we do, she might recall her brother, and we don't want to traumatize her." The she-cat sighed, and murmured, "can you please take his body away? If any of the kits were to see that..."

Nodding, Ravenpaw forced himself to swallow. His throat was dry, and it found it hard to breathe in his sadness and fear. Slowly, he closed his teeth around the tiny scruff, feeling the cold skin touch his mouth. A shiver went through him, but he forced himself to stumble from the den. Still, the camp was empty, and he brought the small body to the center of the clearing and lay it down. Feeling weak, he collapsed next to the dead kit and began to clean his fur, brushing it down. The kit fluff continued to stick up, and Ravenpaw felt bile rising in his throat.

This poor kit died before he even had a chance of life before he even got to become a warrior or even a real Clan member. *I don't even know his name...* Ravenpaw thought with despair. Would he be able to ask the she-kit, or would she bring it up herself?

His mind whirling, Ravenpaw rested his head on his paws and watched the poor kit with sadness. He raised his head when he heard a gasp, and looked up to see that Maskdapple had looked into the clearing to see the kit. Her eyes were full of grief, and old memories. Ravenpaw wondered if she had lost a kit in the past. Finally, the tortoiseshell turned her head away.

Sighing, Ravenpaw rested his head on his paws and waited. For what, he didn't really know, but he still waited, not knowing what else to do. After a while, the sun rose high enough for cats to wake. The first cat to emerge was, of course, Eagleclaw, and she froze at the den entrance, causing a mew of surprise behind her.

"Eagleclaw, move your tail!" Silverstrike pushed his way out and stood there for a shocked moment. Then, he shook out his fur, and meowed, "at least it wasn't one of Goldenpool's."

Eagleclaw and Ravenpaw both looked surprised, but the silver tom padded for the camp entrance without looking at them again,

walking right past the dead kit. Ravenpaw thought he looked a little unsteady. And it wasn't from sleep.

"I'm going hunting," he called behind him to the deputy.

"What about Flamepaw?" Eagleclaw called after him.

"He can clean out the elders' den today," the tom replied as he disappeared, and Maskdapple stared after her mate with sadness.

More cats came out from the warriors' den, and awkward silence went over them as they noticed the dead kit. When Snowfern emerged, she stood there silently for a moment before walking over on soft paws, resting her tail on Ravenpaw's shoulder. "Why don't you go to sleep? I can take him to the burial spot and send his spirit off."

Ravenpaw shook his head, his heart still breaking. "I want to help," he meowed.

Snowfern nodded softly, and said, "We should go, so Eagleclaw can take care of the Clan." Ravenpaw forced himself to nod his head, but before he could grab the kit Snowfern picked it up herself, her teeth gentle against his small scruff. Ravenpaw looked worried, but she shot him a soft expression, and together they headed for the moorland entrance.

A few cats watched after them before Eagleclaw began to order patrols to distract all the cats.

Together, Ravenpaw and his mother brought the dead kit down the rocky pathway and onto the moorland. They walked along the side of the mountain, and Ravenpaw eyed the herbs they passed. There was some chervil growing from the rocky cliff beside them, with tiny stems of chickweed not far. He reminded himself that after their sad task, he would bring some chervil back to camp. At the moment, he couldn't remember the use, but he knew it was helpful.

He also spotted more goldenrod, and as they entered the small area surrounded by bushes in a small dip in the ground, he saw a large patch of thyme. He had never learned the use--as far as he

remembered--but remembered Mossrain having him separate the dead leaves from fresh ones.

Ravenpaw passed many graves, most with grass growing over the small mounds. But one only had a light cover of small, bright green grass. "Berrywhisker?" he whispered softly, and Snowfern looked at him with sad eyes, nodding with the tiny dead kit still in her jaws. She lay him down softly on a clear patch of ground.

"Do you want to choose where to bury him?" Snowfern murmured, eyes soft and sad. Nodding, Ravenpaw looked around the clearing in silence.

A few places stood out to him. The sun rose behind the mountains, and he knew that when it came out a certain spot would be lightened by the sun. Perhaps the little tom would enjoy having the sun rise on him each day... Or perhaps under a rose bush near the edge of the clearing, sweet scents coming from it. But there was also an open space right next to Berrywhisker.

"I want to bury him there, next to Berrywhisker," he said softly. Snowfern looked faintly confused, but she didn't argue and began digging at the grass. Ravenpaw decided to wait until the hole she was making was the size she wanted it, then she began to dig down, piling soil on the side. Now Ravenpaw went forward and began to help.

Because he was so small, it didn't take long to create a grave for the tiny kit. Gently, Snowfern settled him in the hole, and, together, mother and son covered him up, flattening the soil above it so the mound wasn't too large. Light death scent still fluttered around the clearing, but it would likely clear soon, protecting the dead cat from any fox or other creature that might wander onto the territory.

Sitting down with his head dipped, Ravenpaw meowed, "Berrywhisker, if you can hear me, please take in this kit. I don't know if StarClan accepts loners, but he would've been apart of the Clan soon. Take him in, and protect him. Lead him to StarClan's hunting grounds, and teach him to live, even at such a young age. Perhaps he can grow in StarClan, even if a tiny bit..."

Snowfern pressed against him, wrapping her tail around him. He tucked his head in his mother's shoulder, hating the world for taking life from such a young, innocent cat. They sat there for a while, then together they finally left their Clan's burial sight, heading back for camp. When they passed the goldenrod, he took a mouthful of the leaves.

They traveled up the rocky pathway peacefully, but when they entered the clearing anger rushed over him like a wave. Acornstar stood pacing in the clearing, her tail lashing and her fur bristling. A few cats were in the clearing, watching their leader with wide eyes. They all looked uncomfortable, and a part of Ravenpaw knew they were waiting for him and Snowfern.

It seemed Acornstar was as well.

A growl rose in her throat as she walked over, and Ravenpaw dropped his goldenrod, knowing something was wrong. He was terrified when his leader did not look at Snowfern, but instead at him.

"You heard me say I knew these kits would die, and yet you and your mouse-brained mentor didn't listen. Where did you put the body? You did not have the time to leave the territory!" she growled, and Ravenpaw flattened himself to the ground.

"We didn't leave the territory," Snowfern answered, standing close to her son, almost like she was going to protect him. "We buried him with all the other cats we have lost."

Fury glowed in Acornstar's eyes. "You *dare* bury an outsider with our ancestors? That is disgracing their memory!"

"No, *you* are disgracing their memory!" Snowfern growled, surprising the leader and the cats in the clearing. More had appeared, including Ravenpaw's littermates and mentor. He even noticed Goldenpool's eyes flash from the nursery before disappearing again. "He was a defenseless kit and you wanted to leave him to die!"

"Better him than our cats!" Acornstar snapped back.

"The warrior code says we should rescue and help any cat who needs our help, no matter their past!" Snowfern's fur was bristling as much as her leader's, and both their eyes glowed with anger. Ravenpaw noticed both had their claws scraping against the ground.

"You're lecturing *me* about the warrior code?" Acornstar stood a step forward, seeming to grow in size. Surprisingly, Snowfern took a small step back. "You ran away from your Clan because you found love outside of it. And you say I disrespect the code? You're lucky we ever even took you in!"

"This isn't the Clan I thought it was," Snowfern growled.

"Then leave."

Even Snowfern was surprised by the words, and her head moved back, ears flattened and eyes wide. "Excuse me?"

"Leave." Acornstar took another step forward, forcing the white and black she-cat back once again, farther from her terrified kit that crouched over the ground. "Leave my Clan!"

For a moment, Snowfern looked like she was going to move away, sending fear through small Ravenpaw. Was he truly going to lose his mother? Was she going to leave the Clan, leave him?

Relief rushed through him when Snowfern stomped a paw, raising her body higher until her neck was stretched out and her tail was high in the air. "No."

"No?" Acornstar looked worried, but only for a heartbeat, then her eyes went guarded again. "You cannot say no to me! This is my Clan and my territory, and I command you to leave and never return!"

"No," Snowfern said again. "This is my Clan, too. I have given everything to prove my loyalty. I have given you warriors, a medicine cat, and myself. I would give my life for this Clan, and you cannot take away my right to be a warrior."

The rest of Ravenpaw's family had gathered together; Boulderclaw, Jaypaw, Willowpaw, Stonecoat, Shadefur--they all stood together,

looking worried, but also somewhat proud.

Suddenly, Acornstar whipped her head to where Frostfall, Oakcloud, and Foxpounce were gathered. "Chase her from the territory, *now!*"

Snowfern took in a sharp breath, turning her gaze to the cats she obviously saw as friends. Ravenpaw wondered what they would do, terror rushing through him once again. They would listen to their leader, surely? Then why were they hesitating...?

Oakcloud stood a small step forward, eyes full of a hesitant fear. "Acornstar, the only time you come to lead us is to punish a cat. You were once a great leader, but you have been lost for some time, and you are in the wrong. I know we are supposed to follow you through everything, but we cannot do this. Snowfern is a loyal warrior, as are her kits. You cannot chase her from the Clan she has given everything to."

Complete anger flared in the she-cat's eyes. "Traitor! You are a traitor to your Clan!"

"No, he's not." Eagleclaw slowly walked forward, looking sad as she gazed at her mother. "Acornstar, please listen to me. We are all loyal warriors to EchoClan, Oakcloud and Snowfern included. You are not in the right mindset to lead right now. Just trust me, please..."

"My own daughter... Turning against me..." Many emotions rushed in the poor she-cat's gaze. "Is there any cat left that is loyal to me?"

"We are loyal to you, but you cannot punish cats because you are hurting yourself. Redcloud is gone, and he's not coming back." Eagleclaw looked upset, speaking about her dead father.

"*Never* speak his name!" Acornstar yowled, causing poor Ravenpaw to flinch at the anger. Realizing his sadness, Snowfern quickly went and stood over him, licking her son's forehead to calm him. Her scent helped his heart slow down, along with the soft movement of her tongue.

"You can't act like it hasn't changed you!" Eagleclaw growled back. "I have been leading this Clan for moons now! You only come out for ceremonies or punishments! I know you're grieving, I am, too, but your role as a leader is to look past your mourning and lead your Clan!"

Acornstar looked lost for words, and finally, she just growled, teeth gleaming, and stormed away toward her den, leaving her Clan in shocked silence.

If their leader would pick fights with not only her deputy but her medicine cats as well, would they have any chance at a good future?

Ravenpaw was terrified of the answer.

I just want to say to people who might read this book in the future, make sure you comment on the questions, because if I'm still on Wattpad years in the future when you may be reading this, I'll still answer because it makes me so happy to hear what people think!

Question #1: Are you still enjoying the story? (sorry I ask this a lot)

Question #2: Do you think StarClan will accept the little tomkit?

Chapter Sixteen

Rowanpaw was awoken by sharp hunger pains in his stomach, and he winched, curling his body up in a ball. His chest still felt a little tight, but Sandflight told him it would stop in a few more days. He had left the medicine cat's den the day after he got there, and had now slept again in his den for two days. In the past few days, more and more prey had been going to the nursery. Ashbreeze was still incredibly protective of her kits, while Rainsong was still depressed, but took care of little Flintkit the best she could. Meanwhile, Emberheart was getting closer and closer to her kitting.

Cats were getting weaker, including the Twolegplace cats. Rowanpaw was glad he was seeing less and less of Aspenheart and Hawktail, but when he did see them they were skinny and their fur was dull. Their legs had also started to darken with mud, matching the rest of their Clanmates. The only one who still had shiny fur and clean legs was Rainsong, since she was stuck in camp.

"Ratpaw!" Hazelfur's mew sounded from outside the den, and the apprentice groaned, forcing himself up and out of the small log. His stomach felt twisted, and he looked longingly toward where the fresh-kill pile rarely lays. It was, of course, empty. After all, there was never any prey leftover from the day before. "We're all hungry," Hazelfur murmured softly, touching his ear with her nose. "The prey has been hiding the last few days, I believe. Dawnstar did send the entire Clan out hunting after the death of Rainsong's kits... I guess they are all hiding."

"But we're still going hunting?" Rowanpaw asked hopefully. He would be happy even just getting a light stream of blood into his mouth--at least his thirst would be quenched.

"We have too. Brownear and Wishpaw will be coming with us. They're outside camp already." Rowanpaw nodded and followed his mentor, still slightly upset Emberheart couldn't train him. But Hazelfur was good enough. At least she could call him his true name when they were alone. It still hurt to hear "Ratpaw" spoken

from her mouth, but he knew it was because they were in camp, no matter how many cats were out or still sleeping.

He had, after all, been alone in the den, so the rest of the apprentices must've left. Padding up to the camp entrance, Brackenfoot, Bloomcloud, and Hickoryclaw happened to be returning. Bloomcloud held a tiny, scrawny rat in her jaws. Hazelfur seemed inspired by the catch, no matter how small. Hickoryclaw nodded in a friendly way to Rowanpaw. He returned it before leaping down into the muck of his territory.

With his Clanmates, he followed them through the forest, watching Brownear stomp ahead. He still seemed angry that he was given Wishpaw as an apprentice. A small part of Rowanpaw agreed with him. The tom had never gotten an apprentice before, despite his age and rank as a senior warrior, and the first cat he was given to mentor wasn't even Clanborn.

"Smell anything?" the one-eared brown tom grumbled to his apprentice.

Wishpaw opened her mouth and took in the smells of the territory with her scent glands. After a few moments, she dropped her head and softly shook her head. "All I can smell is sap."

Sighing, Brownear mumbled, "predictable." Then he raised his voice and meowed, "Ratpaw, perhaps you can smell something?"

Opening his mouth, the scent of his Clanmates and a light hint of blood came to him. "I can smell Brackenfoot's patrol, and the rat they caught. They must've chased it here before catching it, because it's too close to camp for a piece of prey to be traveling."

"Finally, an apprentice with sense," Brownear said, looking at Wishpaw with slight disgust. "He's barely older than a kit, while you're older than half the warriors. Perhaps you should try harder if you ever want to make it here." The she-cat dropped her head, looking saddened.

Hazelfur almost looked like she was going to say something, but then she closed her jaws and looked down as well. Rowanpaw

sighed, wishing his mentor would stand up to the tom, but she knew she was too young, and he would just ignore her.

The patrol continued traveling through the territory, eyes and ears open for prey. They eventually made it to the Old Thunderpath and began to circle back toward camp. Traveling to the side of the patrol, a faint scent came to his nose. "I smell bird!" he hissed quietly.

Hazelfur stepped closer and rose her muzzle into the air, opening her jaws. "Sparrow, I think."

"Hazelfur, with me," Brownear whispered, crouching down on the muddy ground. He stalked forward and flicked his tail to the right of the tree, then suddenly upward. Instinctively, Rowanpaw lowered himself down to his paws like Brownear had and stalked forward with Wishpaw by his side. Her haunches were a little high, but at least she kept her tail still.

"What are we doing?" Wishpaw murmured under her breath to Rowanpaw, and he wanted to groan but forced himself to stay quiet. Did she know *nothing* about hunting?

"Brownear has directed us to go climb the tree nearest to the sparrow, so if he misses it will fly right for us and we can launch at it," he hissed. Wishpaw nodded quickly, and Rowanpaw decided to add, "don't try to leap for it, even if it comes for us. To have success in this hunt we'd have to leap from the tree, grab it in the air, and land on the branch of the original tree. You don't have the training to do that--you're not used to being in the air."

Wishpaw seemed hurt, but nodded. Her whiskers seemed to droop, and she was quiet as Rowanpaw climbed up the trunk of the nearest tree. He checked where the sparrow was, and noticed it hopping along a branch farther above his head. He continued climbing until he reached a branch that allowed him to look down on the bird. He searched for the warriors, but it was hard to see either of them. Finally, he caught the tiniest hint of Hazelfur's light brown pelt that stood against the dark green, brown, black, and gray of his territory.

Hazelfur climbed in front of Brownear up the tree, going to the branch above the sparrow, while Brownear crouched on the same one as the prey. Slowly, carefully, he inched forward, moving as slow as a worm. He almost seemed to be floating over the wood. Rowanpaw's stomach growled in anticipation, and he wondered if the creature would hear it. But it continued to peck at the bark, probably searching for food.

Suddenly, Brownear leaped for the prey. But, like all BatClan warriors, starvation slowed his speed, and the bird squawked and took off--straight for Rowanpaw and Wishpaw. The she-cat tensed her muscles as it suddenly slowed, catching sight of her bright ginger coat. It was so far! But it couldn't get away, not with Emberheart so close to kitting...

Memories ran through his head, of watching Sparkkit climb up a tree, then the terrifying fall that caused her death... but he was bigger than she was, and would be able to land on his paws.

Growling deep in his throat, Rowanpaw put all his power in his back legs, and took off from the branch, leaving clawmarks behind to forever remember the hunt. The bird, which had begun to turn around, saw his speeding form and cried out in alarm. But it was too late--his claws connected with its chest and he dug his teeth into its wing, allowing him to disconnect his paws to land unsteadily on the tree branch it had flown from.

His claws scratched against the bark as he struggled for a grip, but he felt his back paws disappear from under him, and he was sliding off with the bird clamped in his jaws. Just in time, Brownear reached forward and sunk his teeth into the apprentice's scruff, pulling him back up to safety.

The bird was still in his jaws, so Rowanpaw sat it down on the branch. "Thanks," he meowed to Brownear, but before the tom could answer, the sparrow that had previously lay still suddenly squaked and flipped over, attempting an escape. Because of its broken wing, Brownear had no trouble pinning it to the bark and snapping it's neck with his teeth.

"Haven't seen a piece of prey do that in quite awhile," Brownear

meowed with some amusement. "Good catch."

"You helped," he responded, breathing heavy still. Brownear nodded, then grabbed the bird and made his way down the tree. Rowanpaw followed, backing down slowly.

Staring at the ground far below, another thought reached him: was this the last thing Sparkkit would've seen? Sudden fear rushed him, and he went as fast as he could down the tree.

Finally, he reached the ground with his heart pounding. Hazelfur landed next to him, and pressed against him. She probably didn't understand his fear, but knew it was there. It felt better to have her fur against his, and he leaned into her shoulder, feeling almost like a kit.

Brownear passed the bird to Rowanpaw, and Hazelfur said, "Good leap," as he took it. They had to wait for Wishpaw, who went slowly down the tree.

"Oh come *on,* just jump for it," Brownear growled, irritating at her slow movements. Wishpaw, seemingly scared of the tom's actions if she didn't hurry, pushed off from the tree, going much too far and landing heavily.

Her short legs collapsed under her, leaving her there, groaning. Rowanpaw sighed. This she-cat was going to slow them down so much! The sparrow would be cold by the time they reached camp at this rate.

She's not cut out to be a warrior, Rowanpaw told himself, but he should've realized he was being unfair.

"Get up, Wishpaw!" Brownear hissed, and the she-cat hesitated for a moment, groaning in pain, before she forced herself up, holding a paw against her chest. "Come on," he growled, flicking his tail and padding toward camp.

Rowanpaw stared after the tom for a moment, blood soaking his tongue and helping his great thirst. After Hazelfur began after him, he quietly followed his mentor. Wishpaw hesitated for a moment

longer before falling in line with him. "Good catch," she whispered, head down. She didn't speak again.

The group continued to the BatClan camp in silence, though it was happier than anything. Even Wishpaw, still completely silent except for little whimpers, seemed excited about the catch. It could be split between all the queens, though splitting it between three cats would barely fill their stomachs at all. It was useful, though. It would stop them from starving for at least a day.

They soon made it back to camp, and they climbed up the pathway slowly and carefully. Rowanpaw pulled himself up after Brownear and waited for Hazelfur, looking around the clearing. It seemed like other patrols had also just returned to camp, while another was getting ready to leave, consisting of Leafpelt and Juniperfur, though they seemed to be waiting for another member.

"Good catch!" Leafpelt meowed as the group traveled down the rocks into camp. A few cats looked over and mewed congratulations before distracting themselves from the amazing smell of fresh-kill, something they knew they couldn't touch.

"Take that to the nursery and separate it between the queens and your sisters." Hazelfur didn't need to relay these orders to him, but he nodded and didn't say anything, heading across the small clearing. He entered the small den and looked around. Emberheart was sleeping, her stomach rising up and down slowly. Even though she would be kitting any day now, her stomach seemed small. Sandflight said it was because she was only carrying one kit, perhaps two if it was hidden from the medicine cat's search.

Rainsong was tucked into Bloomcloud's small rat, and she looked up and meowed, "that looks good. You can split it between the others."

Lakeshine, the elder who hid in her nest at the opposite side of the den from the kits, meowed, "I don't need anything."

Ashbreeze looked over, her kits revealed for a moment, before she covered them again. Rowanpaw plucked the feathers free and piled them together for the queens to use another time. Once the meat was freed, he separated it and gave a piece to Ashbreeze, then set

another in front of Emberheart. Surprisingly, the she-cat still slept, though her nose did twitch at the smell of blood.

He gave the largest piece to his sisters, who also slept, curled in their small nest together. They blinked open their eyes at the smell, and mewled excitedly, not bothering to thank him as they scrambled to get something to eat. Rowanpaw felt heavy sadness at how skinny his sisters were, and he wondered if they'd be happier back in the Twolegplace, despite the foxes that had plagued their family.

Sighing, he separated the feathers between the four nests, giving a few extra to Emberheart for her new kits. Rainsong nodded to him as he left, and meowed, "I'll wake her in a few moments," with a nod to Emberheart. Entering the clearing once again, Rowanpaw saw Leafpelt and Juniperfur still waiting by the camp entrance.

He padded over, curious. "Who're waiting for?" he asked, head tilted.

"Heronclaw," Leafpelt replied.

Rowanpaw's eyes widened in his surprise. "But Heronclaw is never late," he meowed.

"He was awake earlier, but he was feeling a little sick. He said he needed a moment," Juniperfur explained, and Rowanpaw thought he saw a flash of worry in her gaze. Leafpelt, on the other hand, just looked annoyed.

"Perhaps he fell asleep again," Rowanpaw meowed.

"It's not like him, but it's possible." Leafpelt stood up and stretched out her muscles, yawning. "I'll go see what he's up to."

She padded across the clearing, and Rowanpaw and Juniperfur watched after her as she disappeared into the warriors' den.

"Heronclaw, get up! Heronclaw? Heronclaw!" her mew was suddenly filled with complete fear. "Great StarClan! *Sandflight!*" she called desperately.

Instantly, Rowanpaw was racing over, along with the rest of the Clan. He looked around the small crowd for Dawnstar, but it seemed she was on patrol. Sandflight shoved her way through the cats, disappearing into the den, and the Clan waited, worry and fear spiking from their pelts. They muttered under their breath to each other, theories on what was going on.

Suddenly, Sandflight stumbled out of the den, looking shocked. "He's dead," she whispered, sending the murmuring Clan into complete shocked silence. "He starved..."

"Emberheart..." Rowanpaw murmured, fear and heartache rushing through him. His dear, dear friend's mate was dead, just before she was going to birth his kits. How would she take this? How much would it hurt her? *StarClan, why? Why the good cats, the cats who deserve to live?*

"I need to be there when she's told," Sandflight said, something flashing in her eyes. Worry, mixed with memories.

"I'll tell her," Hazelfur whispered.

Rowanpaw instantly padded toward her, before she could pad off. "Please let me," he whispered. Grief in her eyes, Hazelfur nodded slowly and stumbled to grab Heronclaw from the den.

Feeling numb with shock and fear, Rowanpaw headed to the nursery once again with the medicine cat beside him. Entering the den, he saw every cat had their head up, except for Emberheart--she still slept, with no idea that her mate was dead in the clearing. Rowanpaw's throat went dry.

"What's happened?" Rainsong asked scaredly.

"Why was someone crying out?" Primkit asked quietly.

"Heronclaw is dead," Sandflight explained softly.

Instant silence and the adult cats all looked at Emberheart, while the kits mewled in fear and tucked themselves into their nest. Rowanpaw went over and licked them each on the head. Then he turned to Emberheart and nudged her cheek with his nose. She

shifted, then her eyes flickered open.

"I smell prey," she meowed tiredly, yawning and sitting up slowly. Her swollen stomach looked uncomfortable under her, but she seemed to be used to it and sniffed excitedly at the bird still sitting in front off her. She took a large bite, and Rowanpaw found himself unwilling to speak until the prey was gone. The rest of the cats, realizing this was for Rowanpaw to say, waited silently.

"Emberheart..." he began slowly, swallowing when his throat felt as dry as tree bark.

She seemed to sense the uneasiness in the air, and looked up at him, confused and slightly worried. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Rowanpaw couldn't help but look at Sandflight, before eying his paws. "It's... it's Heronclaw..."

Overwhelming terror rushed from Emberheart, so strong Rowanpaw thought he was going to be knocked off his paws. "What happened? Is he hurt?" Her claws gripped the moss under her.

"He..." Rowanpaw took a heavy breath in and out. "He's... he's dead." He couldn't bring himself to even look at his poor friend's beautiful yellow gaze.

He heard the mournful yowl begin in her throat, before her jaws opened wide and she began to screech her sadness into the air, crying into the bright early morning. Her yowl echoed through the cave, throughout the whole clearing, letting every BatClan cat know the she-cat now knew of her mate's passing.

Then, suddenly, instead of sadness, there was unbearable pain, and Rowanpaw looked up quickly to see ripples running over Emberheart's light ginger stomach, and she slammed her head down into the moss, claws gripping the nest around her.

"I knew this would happen," Sandflight meowed, hurrying to the she-cat's side.

"What's happening?" Rowanpaw mewled like a lost kit, looking terrified.

"The shock has forced her into kitting," Sandflight meowed distractedly. "Fernkit, I have some raspberry leaves set out in my den. Bring them to me," she meowed, and the kit instantly shot from the nest and out of the den. Rowanpaw barely noticed his sisters mewling in fear, and stood next to his old mentor, fur bristling.

Sandflight gently worked her paws on Emberheart's stomach, and the medicine cat softly shushed Emberheart's cries of pain. Fernkit returned a moment later, dropping leaves at her future mentor's side before taking two small seeds and giving them to her sisters. "Eat this," she ordered softly.

"Good thinking," Sandflight praised the kit. If Rowanpaw hadn't been so distracted, he likely would've congratulated her as well, but instead he just stared with worry at the suffering Emberheart. Blood started leaking from under Emberheart's tail. "Rowanpaw, get those kits out of here, all three of them," Sandflight hissed, worry seeping through her teeth. He didn't move.

Instead, Lakeshine struggled up from her nest, nudging the kits from their nest. "Come on, you three, you heard the medicine cat." Fernkit looked upset to leave, but eventually followed, casting her pale yellow eyes back with worry. Sandflight hurriedly chewed up the raspberry leaves, then spit them into Emberheart's mouth and ran a paw over her throat many times until she swallowed.

Moons seemed to pass as they waited there, more and more blood leaving Emberheart until she was laying in a pool of her own blood, soaking her fur. Absolute terror was rushing through Rowanpaw. It looked like when Violet had died, blood everywhere. This was too much blood, he knew that. Emberheart was losing too much blood... Sandflight seemed to know that as well.

"Come on, Emberheart, push! For your kit!"

Emberheart let out a loud, echoing yowl, just as a tiny sac slid out into the pool of blood, getting covered by the thick liquid. Instantly, Sandflight scooped the kit out, laying it on the clear ground. She nipped the sac and a tiny, slimy kit slid out, completely still.

"Breathe, kit, breathe," Sandflight rushed as she desperately licked the kit's wet fur. Every bit of Rowanpaw was focused on the tiny creature. Then, it took a huge, shuddering breath. "Thank StarClan!" Sandflight gasped. "Emberheart, it's a she-kit!" She turned excitedly to the queen, and stopped in her tracks.

Rowanpaw knew it before he even looked up, but yet his heart still completely shattered and dropped when he raised his gaze to see his beloved friend lying limp her nest.

Emberheart was dead.

This probably wasn't what you were hoping for after a long break...

#1: What do you think this will mean for Rowanpaw's future?

#2: Do you care that both Herocnlaw and Emberheart died? Did you like them?

#3: What do you think the kit will be named?

Chapter Seventeen

Numb.

That's all Rowanpaw felt as he stared at the dead body of Emberheart, her sightless gaze clouding over as she stared into nothing. Every muscle in Rowanpaw's body was tensed, locked in place. Even his whiskers didn't twitch as he stared at her body, his breath shaking and uneven.

Gone. The only thing running through his head. *Gone. Gone. Gone.* His heart was shattered into countless pieces, and inside of him a storm of darkness was swirling, growing and swelling in his grief. But no sign of his inner turmoil showed in his gaze. His eyes were completely blank, only showing a terrible, overwhelming mix of sadness and anger.

Finally, his thoughts strayed from the repeat of the word "gone,", and instead filled with something worse: *StarClan is at fault.* In that instant, Rowanpaw swore hate against the dead cats. They had taken *everything* from him. First Sparkkit, barely a kit, died because they allowed a storm to take the pine forest; then they caused Emberheart's sudden, weak kitting by taking Heronclaw.

Rowanpaw had only ever truly loved three cats in his life: Sparkkit, Emberheart, and Blazepaw. They had taken two of those cats from him. How long until they decided to take his brother as well? Was that when they would finally be done? Or would they continue to take away the cats he cared for less, but still kept close to him? Would they destroy his Clan, taking more and more cats until there wasn't enough to survive? How long until they took him, as well?

Maybe I should beat them to it, he thought grimly, for a moment forgetting why he was so full of rage.

But his eyes then once again rested on the paling body of the cat he loved most besides his brother, and once again another wave of

grief flooded him. Suddenly, every problem and discrepancy he had ever experienced, big or small, was StarClan's fault; his mother leaving him as a tiny kit, Sparkkit's death, the dirty water in their territory, the lack of prey, the random deaths of Clanmates, the random chance of running into Rohan, the reappearance of his mother, the death of Violet, the death of Heronclaw, and finally, most importantly, the heart-breaking loss of dear Emberheart. Even more problems came to mind, and even if it made no sense, he managed to link it back to StarClan.

He was sure of it now:

StarClan was against him, and they were against BatClan.

Every moment he still breathed, every step he took alive, StarClan would be waiting for him to die.

But he would not give in, he would not give them the satisfaction of breaking him.

He would keep his Clan alive, no matter what it took. No more cats would starve while he was in the Clan. If he had to steal from another territory, so be it. If he had to kill to protect a Clanmate... So be it. Any cat that stood in his way would be going down. No matter who they were. He wouldn't lose Blazepaw, or this little kit right in front of him.

He finally removed his gaze from Emberheart, down to the mewling, wiggling shape of the parentless kit. It's tiny pink nose searched the air for milk, and automatically began to crawl towards Rainsong, who was as silent as any cat. The kit's movements faltered, and she lay still, weak and tired.

Instantly, Rowanpaw was in action. His grief was pushed aside just enough to take care of the only thing he had left of Emberheart. "Raingsong, take care of her?" he said quietly. The she-cat looked surprised, like she was in her own mind, but then nodded quickly.

"Forever," she promised in a whisper.

His legs feeling weak, Rowanpaw went to the small kit and lifted it

in his jaws by its tiny scruff, and set it down next to Flintkit, who was only the tiniest bit bigger than her. After a moment, her small head raised and she began to suckle. Rainsong pulled her in close, then curled around the two kits protectively.

The dead ferns at the entrance rustled, and Rowanpaw looked over slowly to see Hazelfur entering, her eyes full of fearful excitement. But it instantly died as she gazed at the body of her sister. Of course. She was coming in hoping to see Emberheart, weak but alive, nursing her kit. Instead, she came to a bloody den, where the cats stood in shock at the limp body of a queen, her only kit to be raised by another cat.

"Oh, no... Not you..." Hazelfur lowered herself to the ground, slinking over through the blood to her sister's side. She nudged her cheek, a little mew in her throat. Finally, she closed her eyes, taking in a shaking breath. "StarClan, watch over her, please..."

"StarClan won't do anything for her," Rowanpaw hissed coldly, and Hazelfur shot her gaze up, full of grief and shock. "They're just waiting for our Clan to die."

Without waiting to see Hazelfur's expression, he whipped around and left the den, fur still high and bristling with no sign of coming down anytime soon. Outside, the Clan was gathered anxiously, knowing something was very wrong. Dawnstar had returned, and was waiting next to Clovertail and Birchsplash.

"What's going on?" Dawnstar asked as he headed over, trying to get to the camp entrance but having to pass them--the clearing was too small to avoid anyone, especially if they stood right in the center like his leader was. "I heard Emberheart has gone into kitting. Is she okay? How are the kits?"

Rowanpaw stared at her with a blank expression. "Emberheart is dead." The words felt bitter and unreal coming from his mouth. It felt like he was speaking a curse, one that would sentence him to cleaning the dens of old moss. It felt like a lie, something made up to cause drama and grief.

"No..." Clovertail's eyes filled with disbelief, and she raced for the

nursery, tail streaming behind her.

Rowanpaw tried to leave, but Dawnstar blocked his way. "And her kits?"

"She had one. She lived." He slipped past the she-cat and moved for the camp entrance. But, suddenly, Birchsplash was in front of him, forcing him to stop once again. Anger boiled inside of him as the weak tom tried to keep him back.

"Stay in camp," he ordered.

"No." Rowanpaw watched him daringly, waiting for him to move.

"Yes." Birchsplash took a step closer, and Rowanpaw couldn't stop himself from moving back slightly. "Are you really going to disrespect Emberheart by leaving when the Clan begins to mourn her? Are you not going to help her spirit rest in StarClan?"

"StarClan doesn't deserve her!" Rowanpaw growled. "They caused her death, and pretty soon they'll take all of us, too! StarClan isn't trying to help us, they're just waiting for us to die."

Birchsplash's gaze hardened. "Do not speak ill of our warrior ancestors."

"Or what? They'll smite me where I stand? They can't do *anything* to me. And neither can you."

"He might not be able to, but I can." Dawnstar approached yet again. "Ratpaw, I forbid you from leaving camp until tomorrow, after we mourn the fallen. You may not respect StarClan, but surely you still respect Emberheart, even in death?" Her eyes were hard and cold, daring him to fight her word.

To angered to say anything, Rowanpaw whipped around and stalked over to where Heronclaw's body lay, sitting down roughly and scraping his claws against the ground. He looked up when he heard the nursery entrance rustle, and pain seared the shattered pieces of his heart when Emberheart's body was pulled into the clearing. For a few moments, the Clan was in shocked, mournful silence, gathered around the bodies of the two mates, so quickly

taken away from each other then reunited in death.

"We have lost two great warriors today," Dawnstar began. "We honor the sacrifices they have made in the past, and we all hope StarClan takes them in as heroes, for even though they did not die protecting their Clan, they lived their life ready to do so. Heronclaw always cared more about feeding his Clanmates than himself, and it is a sad ending that this selflessness caused him to lose his life. Emberheart, his mate, always did the same and brought back prey in even the toughest of times. She was lost to us giving us another warrior, who shall be raised by Rainsong, but will be told of her parents' love and dedication to their Clan and her."

The Clan dropped their heads in her inspiring but sad words and sat in silence in honor of the two cats. After a while, a few warriors who knew they needed to feed the Clan began to stand, ready to patrol.

"Wait for just a moment," Dawnstar said, and Brackenfoot and Brownear, the first two to rise, looked at each other before sitting down again. "We haven't had a situation like this before, as far as I remember. Usually, if the she-cat dies giving birth, the father can name the kits. But with the loss of both of them, their she-kit is nameless. Please, let it be so that they shared what they wanted to name their kit?"

Rowanpaw was surprised when Birchsplash, Hazelfur, and Clovertail were silent, looking crestfallen. Emberheart had told him, but no one else. Before he could speak up, Birchsplash meowed quietly, "Emberheart told us she wanted to name her kit Ryekit if it was a tom but didn't tell us the name for a she-kit. She had one, so told us that much, but she wanted it to be a surprise, especially to us."

Dawnstar looked at her paws. "Well, I guess the honor of naming the kit shall go to Clover--"

"Wait," Rowanpaw finally managed to speak up. "She... she told me..." He was angered that Dawnstar looked disbelieving like he would make it up. Calmly, he added smoothly, "it was on the journey to the Twolegplace when we were in the garden of the

loner cats. We were getting ready to nest under a bush, and she told me the names she and Heronclaw wanted."

After a moment, Dawnstar nodded, accepting his story. "Alright, Ratpaw. What was the name she wished to give her she-kit?"

The two names instantly came to mind: Hopekit and Dovekit. But Dovekit was if she looked like Heronclaw, and from what still stayed in his mind of the small kit, she looked just like Emberheart, a light ginger she-kit with ragged stripes, which would straighten out as she gained more adult fur. It was likely that when she grew, she would look exactly like her mother.

But Rowanpaw could say any name he wanted, and he would be trusted. He could say the name he wanted to name the kit, no matter if Emberheart would've liked it or not. The idea tempted him for a moment, but the better part of his mind fought against it. He loved Emberheart too much to do that. Still, some of him wanted to say Emberkit, in order for her mother to live on, but the Clan would see through that.

Letting out a calming breath, Rowanpaw spoke. "Emberheart wanted her she-kit to be named Hopekit so that during dark times like this, we could think of a better future that involved the new cats we were raising. She wanted her kit to be the light of the Clan, and give hope to our future."

The Clan stayed silent, seemingly want to honor her memory. Finally, Dawnstar meowed, "So be it. Emberheart and Heronclaw's kit shall be named Hopekit, to give us hope of a better future."

I think it's almost been a month and a half since I last updated, which is awful and I apologize, especially because this is a short chapter. But I started school at the beginning of the month and I guess I was so distracted I forgot about this story for awhile...

Chapter Eighteen

Five days after the two new kits had joined the Clan, and only one day after the loss of the unnamed tom, Ravenpaw worked on cleaning Russetdawn's wounds, though his ears were perked and angled to listen behind him.

"Just lay still." Mossrain ordered to Blossompaw, and Ravenpaw could hear his sister moving around in her nest, shifting as Mossrain tried to look her over.

"I'm uncomfortable! And my back hurts!" Blossompaw argued. Worry spiked Ravenpaw's heart. Did she need a poppy seed? He waited for the order to grab one, but it didn't come.

"That means it's healing. And if you don't want it to hurt, then lay still."

"I want to get out of this nest!" Ravenpaw turned his head when he heard Mossrain hiss in displeasure, and saw Blossompaw trying to stand. As her back curled, she cried out and dropped back onto the moss, breathing heavy.

"It's been a quarter moon since your injury, Blossompaw, you need to give it time." Mossrain seemed annoyed with the young apprentice.

"Well, how long until I can leave?" She growled fiercely, eyes hard and ears flat. Unable to watch her gaze, Ravenpaw turned back to Russetdawn, watching her eyelids flutter open and closed, her breathing fast but smooth. She had woken up earlier, but only for a moment. In those waking moments, she had been able to see Foxpounce and her kits briefly, before she fell asleep again.

Now, she was going in and out of consciousness, and Mossrain had told Eagleclaw to keep Foxpounce and his kits out of camp because they continued to stick their heads in and check on her, blocking the light the clearing gives the den. But Mossrain was hopeful about

her recovery. Her wounds were healing incredibly nicely, just like the rest of the Clan. Most of them had only scars, now, though a few warriors had to go easy--Grayblaze and Foxpounce especially. Grayblaze could still only go on small patrols, while Foxpounce was sentenced back to the same after the travel through the forest when they rescued the kits. It seems he had reopened a wound.

"I'm not sure." Mossrain's uncertain voice brought Ravenpaw back to real life, and he began to cover Russetdawn's stomach wound with a pulp. "I plan to ask them tonight at the Moonstream."

While Blossompaw snorted and sighed with a roll of her eyes, Ravenpaw shifted in fear and excitement. He was so happy to be returning to the Moonstream and to see the other medicine cats, but a few things kept him back; Blossompaw was untamable and wouldn't stay in the nest if left alone, Russetdawn was still injured despite slowly healing, and he was worried about what he would find in StarClan. He trusted them to have taken in the unnamed tom, but what if, in the slimmest possibility, they hadn't? Would Ravenpaw go to the Moonstream, and find him not there? Where was his spirit, if not protected by StarClan's mighty gaze? Would he be forced to wander eternally, searching for his sister? Or was he with his mother, if she was truly dead?

"What's the use to ask dead cats?" Blossompaw scorned. "They're *dead.*"

"They are wise," Mossrain argued softly, obviously trying to withhold any anger he felt toward the defiant she-cat. "Many medicine cats are up there, and a few of them have dealt with a situation like this, I'm sure of it. I just need their opinion. I will tell you what I find out later tonight."

"Useless," Blossompaw muttered as she turned her head away, resting it on her front paws. Mossrain looked saddened but left the apprentice behind him and padded over to Russetdawn's side. He sniffed her wounds then nodded, satisfied.

"She should be alright for tonight."

"Can we leave her alone?" Ravenpaw asked, but he flicked his ears

towards Blossompaw, too scared to mention her by name in case she overheard.

Mossrain nodded. "Jaypaw has graciously offered to watch over Russetdawn. If something happens to her, he can tell Goldenpool. If he gets tired, Willowpaw will watch for awhile. This also means they can spend time with Blossompaw."

The she-cat snorted from her nest but otherwise stayed quiet. Ravenpaw knew the real plan by the way Mossrain's eyes shined: Jaypaw and Willowpaw *would* be watching Russetdawn in case something happened, but they were also there to make sure Blossompaw didn't try to get out of her nest.

"When are we leaving?" Knowing his littermates were to be watching Blossompaw and Russetdawn now took care of his worries, at least mostly. Blossompaw could be so strong-willed sometimes, she might try to convince her watcher to help her away. And Jaypaw was a natural follower, a natural warrior. He might just listen to her if she used the right words. And Willowpaw might be desperate to connect again with her sister and allow her to leave. But Ravenpaw realized he must have faith in the two.

"In a few hours, when the moon begins to rise," Mossrain answered, looking out at the darkening clearing. "Why don't you go check on Goldenpool? I'll finish up with Russetdawn."

"Okay!" Ravenpaw brightened instantly and brushed caringly against his mentor as he got up, purring slightly, and bounced from the den. He noticed a guarded, cold look in Blossompaw's eyes, and he faltered for a moment, but then he forced himself past it and hurried into the clearing. As he slipped into the open, he saw a patrol returning from outside the camp, and he instantly noticed their ruffled fur.

It was led by Silverstrike, who looked uncomfortable and rested more on one shoulder, closely crowded by the two other patrol members Thorntail and Flamepaw. Already, Ravenpaw could see that wasn't a good sign. All three toms were bad-tempered, and with two young and one injured--Silverstrike was still recovering from the dog battle, which was why he was leaning on one

shoulder--suggested they might have run into trouble, and probably lost.

"What's happened?" Eagleclaw seemed to share the same conclusion as the young medicine cat apprentice and padded close to the three toms, looking worried as the cold wind ruffled her light brown pelt.

"We were chasing a rabbit from the moorland into the forest, and it crossed the river border," Silverstrike began, and Ravenpaw was instantly distracted. No wonder Silverstrike looked awkward standing there! He shouldn't have been running in the first place. "Flamepaw was so distracted by the hunt that he ran over the stream without realizing it."

It seemed the young red tom didn't agree with this, and anger flashed in his eyes. He opened his mouth to argue, but it was, surprisingly, Thorntail who silenced him with a hard shove. Silverstrike looked back at them, then shook his head slightly, muttering under his breath, before looking back at his deputy--and the cat he probably considered to be more a leader than her mother.

"I tried to call him back," Silverstrike continued, "but it was too late--a SageClan patrol had noticed us. Flamepaw had managed to catch the rabbit, but couldn't get it back over the stream in time. He was lucky to lose nothing more than some fur." He looked at his apprentice with a burn of anger. The young tom stared back with a similar gaze, strong-headed after having his two main role models--his father Foxpounce and his mentor Silverstrike--both quick to anger and opinions.

"Did they attack?" Eagleclaw demanded.

"No, but they did taunt us." Anger flared in the silver and white tom's blue gaze. "It was unbelievable! They had four adult warriors, so they knew they would have the upper paw in a fight, so they taunted us because they thought there would be no repercussions! But they were wrong! They *were* wrong, right?"

"We should attack!" Foxpounce stepped forward unsteadily, looking tired and weak but still defiant at rude neighbors.

"Now hold on a minute," Eagleclaw meowed, flicking her tail. "We must be rational about this."

"What, you're going to roll over and show your belly, instead of standing up for yourself?" Silverstrike growled. "*I* want to fight, and show those rabbit-chasers who's boss!"

"You chase rabbits, too, mouse-brain," Maskdapple grumbled.

Silverstrike looked at his mate with a determined gaze. "Does that really matter? They taunted us because they thought we're weak! But we're not!" Silverstrike's claws dug into the ground, then he flinched at his injured shoulder.

"They could've attacked, but they didn't," Eagleclaw argued softly. Ravenpaw realized the situation she was in, trying to decide if they were to fight or not. Many warriors were now surrounding the she-cat, looking at her for guidance. And though she had been deputy for a long time and had been making most of the decisions for the Clan, it seemed Eagleclaw was truly now more leader than ever. And she wasn't ready for it, despite being one of the oldest warriors in the Clan--it didn't make it any easier. Eagleclaw was a young warrior at heart.

Ravenpaw suddenly felt incredibly bad for the she-cat. She was strong, and a good leader even under pressure like this, but she has always had a hard life. She lost her father, her mother went partly insane, she was trusted with guiding her Clan from a very young age, and she had never been able to take a mate or have kits of her own. Her entire life had been spent leading her Clan and helping her mother. Would Eagleclaw ever have the chance to have her own life? There were no open toms in the Clan, anyways. Grayblaze was the only one close enough to her age without a mate, but Ravenpaw was pretty sure he would father Frostfall's litter in a few moons.

Because of Acornstar, Eagleclaw has lost her chance. Would she ever get another one?

"Attacking almost would've been better," Foxpounce argued.

"They practically did attack!" Thorntail finally spoke up, looking

angry. "They spoke to us like we were stupid kits."

"Watch yourself, Thorntail," Oakcloud said quietly. "Do not let your anger cloud your judgment."

Thorntail curled his lip at the senior warrior. "Don't treat me like your kit! You took away that right after you betrayed Appleleaf!"

Oakcloud flinched at the name. "I *never* betrayed your mother. I love her with every heartbeat that passes!"

"You never cared about her," Thorntail hissed. "You were waiting for the moment you could have kits with Goldenpool. You took Appleleaf out of *pity*. You never wanted her, and you never wanted me."

Oakcloud looked distressed and opened his mouth to retort, but Eagleclaw growled in a strained meow, "enough! Save your family squabbles for another time. Snowfern!" She called the she-cat standing at the edge of the crowd. "Take Stonecoat and Shadefur hunting. Thorntail and Foxpounce, go gather moss. Pebblepeak, you and Frostfall take all the apprentices out of camp for some group training in the hollow. Do a mock battle. Maskdapple, Oakcloud, Boulderclaw, Grayblaze, and Silverstrike--all of you with me at the warriors' den entrance to talk about this battle."

She flicked her tail and led the senior warriors to their den, while Pebblepeak teamed up with Frostfall to head to the apprentices' den. Snowfern touched noses with her identical sons then lead them to hunt, Thorntail following grumpily behind. Ravenpaw watched as Brightpaw, Firepaw, and Flamepaw came from the den and joined Petalpaw, Featherpaw, Willowpaw, and Jaypaw at the moorland entrance, then they followed the two warriors out.

Ravenpaw, for the slightest moment, wanted to join them, mostly to join his littermates and friends in something fun. But instead, with a sigh, he turned to the medicine cat's den, spotting the gray tail tip of his mentor fluttering out of view from inside the den. He hurried inside and found that even the smell of the herbs--something that used to relax him greatly--did nothing to soothe his longing for friendship. He never realized how lonely it was to be a medicine cat

until that moment.

"Did you hear what's going on?" Ravenpaw asked Mossrain as the tom settled by Russetdawn's side, feeling her webbed wounds softly with a delicate, trained paw. Ravenpaw quickly flicked his gaze to the form of Blossompaw, sleeping quietly with a poppy head settled on the ground on a leaf in front of her nest.

"What, Oakcloud and Thorntail arguing? It happens every day." Mossrain's tail flicked. "It's nothing for us to worry about."

Something seemed to be irritating Mossrain, and Ravenpaw approached his mentor slowly. "Did you hear about the battle plans?"

Mossrain's claws scraped the ground slightly, but only for a moment. "It sounds like they're still trying to decide. It has nothing to do with us."

"Shouldn't we be helping them decide?" Ravenpaw questioned, sitting down.

"Helping them decide what? How to attack an enemy?" Mossrain sounded bitter.

"On whether there will be a battle," Ravenpaw mewed, feeling a little scared.

"If they want our opinion, they will ask for it. But warriors will always find a way to fight, one way or another."

"But don't we want to avoid a battle?" Ravenpaw pressed desperately, wanting to hear more from his normally-lively mentor.

"Of course we do!" Mossrain suddenly snapped, but after Blossompaw groaned and shifted in her nest, Mossain lowered his voice into a harsh whisper, still not looking at Ravenpaw. "But battles are nothing new. They will always happen, no matter what medicine cats want. Warriors can preach they are about peace and tolerance of other Clans but the moment one claw gets put out of place they go for the throat. Sooner or later, EchoClan and SageClan will fight a useless battle that brings a divide to the two Clans until

another battle breaks out, and so it will continue until the end of the Clans."

Ravenpaw was speechless. Mossrain normally spoke too much, but he never seemed as serious as this. He had a hard look in his hazel gaze, and the patch around his eye seemed more of a pale gray than it's usual bright white. He suddenly looked very tired, and very old.

Was this the fate of a medicine cat? To worry about battles that you couldn't stop until your time ends?

"Surely we can something?" Ravenpaw whispered, not wanting to give up.

"Of course we can." Mossrain shook himself, straightening up. "We can heal. Go get Silverstrike and bring him here. I saw him winching on his shoulder."

"Me go get him?" Ravenpaw felt fear fill him.

"Yes, Ravenpaw, you," Mossrain growled, turning his eyes on his apprentice, and suddenly they went weak. He had finally noticed the fearful gaze in the young tom's gaze, and he dropped his head. "I'm sorry. I'm just so done with battles and injuries. I'm stressed enough as it is, and with Goldenpool with her kits, it makes everything harder: Blossompaw's injury, Russetdawn being unconscious, so many warriors still weak, Acornstar out of commission, Eagleclaw pressured to be leader, Clanmates fighting, and now SageClan causing trouble? It's almost too much to handle."

"And training me? Does that make it harder or easier?"

Mossrain's hesitation made Ravenpaw's heart sink until the older tom finally pressed against Ravenpaw's smaller frame. "Easier. Much, much easier. It makes me calmer, and I have someone to talk to. Goldenpool is, of course, busy with her kits, so it's nice to have someone to help me."

Ravenpaw nodded slowly. "So what are we going to do?"

"As I said," Mossrain answered, shaking out his coat and sitting taller. "You are going to go tell Silverstrike to come in here so I can

look at his shoulder."

Once again, fear crept up on Ravenpaw. "Can't you tell him?" he asked quietly, scratching the ground with his claws.

"No, you need to get more confident in dealing with patients. You're good when they're in here, but you need to get in control out in the clearing. Every cat in the Clan is your patient, and every cat must listen to you. You tell Eagleclaw to come to the den and she must listen. Now, go tell Silverstrike I want to see him."

Nodding quietly, Ravenpaw forced himself to his paws and padded from the den, shivering as the cooling air ruffled his thin coat. Suddenly, he wondered why Eagleclaw had ordered everybody from camp. It was rather late for a hunting patrol, there was truly no need for moss right now, and it was *way* too late for a group training with the apprentices. Something like that should be started in the morning, not when the moon was beginning to rise.

It took a few moments of standing there to realize why Eagleclaw cleared the camp: She didn't want anybody but senior warriors listening in on her conversation deciding on a battle or not. *Should I not go over there?* He slid his paw back to return to his den, but it was too late.

"Ravenpaw!" Boulderclaw raised his head from where he lay with the other warriors, a shrew in front of his paws. All the warriors turned to look at him. Knowing his fate was sealed, Ravenpaw dragged himself over.

"Uh, Mossrain wants Silverstrike in the medicine cat's den, to check his shoulder..." Ravenpaw swallowed uncomfortably, shifting from paw to paw.

"Alright, Silverstrike, go." Eagleclaw nodded to the den.

"What? My shoulder is fine, just a little sore. I need to be in this discussion." Silverstrike's silver and white fur bristled, his blue eyes flaring.

"You don't fight with a medicine cat's word, no matter how young.

Go see your son, Silverstrike." Eagleclaw turned her head away to look at the other warriors as if she was ignoring Silverstrike's existence.

Sighing, the tom forced himself to his paws, flinching as his shoulder pressed against the ground, and Ravenpaw saw a hint of relief in the tom's eyes as he headed for his son's den. Ravenpaw followed him slowly, hearing Eagleclaw start up the conversation again.

"Alright, now that we don't have Silverstrike interrupting every sentence with 'let's have a battle', why don't we discuss our future and the future of our Clan?"

Chapter Nineteen

"Come on, Ravenpaw, we'll be late!" Mossrain leaped over large roots and skirted bramble bushes with a hop in his step, seemingly much happier than earlier. After Silverstrike came into the den and grumbled about most of the senior warriors arguing against a battle, Mossrain had seemed to be in a better place of mind. It was easy to see the battle had worried Mossrain, but now he was more confident it would be avoided, and had once again become his happy-go-lucky self. He would probably be babbling a storm if he didn't have a squirrel filling most of his muzzle, a gift for Sandflight.

Ravenpaw tried to adjust the grip he had on the sparrow stuffed in his jaws, for a feather had been rubbing against the top of his mouth. He followed Mossrain's pawsteps with a little hesitation, searching the darkening shadows for any eyes that might be watching them. He had become more fearful of the dark forest since Blossompaw's attack, even though it had happened during the day. Being out here without a warrior to protect him... His fur bristled at a rustling in the undergrowth, and he rushed to his mentor's side, flanks heaving.

"Easy, Ravenpaw, we're alone out here." Mossrain pressed against his side comfortingly.

Exactly, Ravenpaw wanted to point out, but he kept quiet. Instead, he continued to scan the shadowy forest, watching as the leaves slowly fluttered down to the forest floor, the trees almost empty now that leaf-bare was practically here. Mossrain believed it would start snowing anytime in the next few days. They had been stocking up herbs the best they could, but were still low on a few. Mossrain said as long as they had catmint, they would be fine. But Ravenpaw was worrying of a bad case of greencough. Ravenpaw hadn't been alive then, but apparently a bad bunch of the illness swept through the Clan and killed an elder, a warrior, and took one of Acornstar's lives. Mossrain had been a brand new apprentice, and said almost

every cat in the Clan came down with it, and they were extremely lucky not to lose any more cats than the two. He didn't seem that bothered by Acornstar loosing a life, and had explained that it was only the third the she-cat had lost in her leadership. She still had six left.

Six left. She had six lives to loose, while her warriors only one. But yet she spent her time hiding in her cave? Mossrain said that's how she got it, because she never exercised or ate she was weak and an open vessel for illness to take her. She had been given this amazing chance by StarClan to protect her Clan, but instead her daughter, with only one life to lose, was to lead her Clan for countless moons as a deputy.

Acornstar should step down. Fear flooded Ravenpaw as the dishonorable thought came to him. His pawsteps faltered. *StarClan, I'm so sorry!* He turned his head to the dark starry sky, and eyed the half-moon staring threateningly down at him. *I didn't mean it! I know I must have faith in my leader.* He *had* to follow the medicine cat code, and the warrior code, even if he wasn't a warrior. And both demanded he stay loyal to his leader, and that he must help them and guide them with the best of his ability. And that meant sticking by Acornstar when she was sick in the head.

Now terror coursed through is veins at the thought he would visit the Moonstream and StarClan would not answer his call, all because of his momentary thought of betrayal. His legs suddenly didn't work, and he faltered to a stop, dropping the sparrow into the fallen leaves. Mossrain either heard him stop or sensed his distress, for he slowed and turned to look back. He turned around and headed back for his apprentice, dropping the squirrel next to the sparrow.

"What's wrong? We mustn't be too late or Sandflight might leave without us." Mossrain's tail flicked to show his hurry to get going, but patience also shined in his eyes.

"What's going to happen with Acornstar?" Ravenpaw murmured, looking at his small, dark paws.

Surprise waved from Mossrain for a moment, before he covered it up with a shake of his fur, his head rising. Ravenpaw slowly angled

his head up to look at his mentor. He didn't look angry, just thoughtful and worried.

"I don't know," he said simply after a few moments. "Why do you ask?"

"I-I think some of the Clan wants Acornstar to step down to Eagleclaw." His ears burned with shame, and he desperately wanted to lick down his chest fur, but he was frozen under Mossrain's unreadable gaze.

"Do you think this way?" Mossrain asked finally, tilting his head slightly.

Ravenpaw dropped his head and nodded slowly. "Will StarClan punish me for thinking that? I don't want them upset with me!" he added hurriedly, gazing up at his mentor with fear in his wide yellow eyes. "But Acornstar wants Snowfern out of the Clan, and I can't lose my mother! And she seems so angry all the time, and she's fighting with Goldenpool and you and Eagleclaw--" He broke off, breathing heavy.

"Ravenpaw, calm," Mossrain murmured, circling around his apprentice and pressing against his side. "Everything will be okay. StarClan will tell us if anything is wrong tonight at the Moonstream. Let's not be late, shall we?" He touched Ravenpaw's ear with his nose then padded forward, picking up his squirrel and looking back at his apprentice.

Shivering, Ravenpaw picked up the sparrow awkwardly in his small teeth and headed unsteadily after his mentor. Mossrain swept his tail over Ravenpaw's shoulders and left it there as they traveled, with the gray tom just a little ahead of his black-furred apprentice. Ravenpaw tried to remember the way they had went the first time to the Moonstream, but the path they had taken to first the border with BatClan then to the Star Cave was blurred with sudden memories.

He had been to the Star Cave twice in his short life; once during the honorary half-moon trip with the other medicine cats, and once to get rid of his powers to see briefly into the future, but he had failed

on that mission and instead learned two things from Echo, the first leader of his Clan--to listen to his heart, despite what StarClan might say, and the be ready for an enemy that was coming.

But that's happened, right? The Twolegs had come and gone, so that part was finished. But he had yet to listen to his heart. Or did it mean with Blossompaw? His heart was saying to continue trying to help her, while his mind told him to forget it. But could there be something bigger in the future for him? Echo said many in StarClan didn't want him to listen to his heart heart, but she convinced him he must no matter what anybody said.

Worry flooded every bone in his body, and he was incredibly grateful when he saw the forest end and turn to Thunderpath, but then confusion washed over him again when he noticed not Sandflight waiting for him, but two small, skinny warriors. One was a brown tom with a large, ugly fleshy scar that covered one side of his face, taking one ear and leaving a few uneven scraps behind, barely missing his brown gaze.

The other cat was a slightly darker brown with tabby stripes and a white chest and front paws. His eyes were lighter than the other cat's. His fur had more of a grayish, ashy overtone, though mud had begun to stain his paws like his Clanmate's. Ravenpaw wondered if they were related, but their body shapes were rather different, and the one with the ashy covering on his coat almost seemed... newer. Newer to the territory.

"I've been planning on trying to get closer to him, but now he seems so withdrawn, after losing so many cats close to him. He was so strong, head-strong and rude, but strong. He could be a great warrior if he got past this, but after Ember--" the brown tabby suddenly broke off when he noticed the medicine cats approaching through the darkness.

The injured tom followed his gaze, and sighed in relief. "Finally!" he grumbled, getting to his paws and shaking out his fur. "We've been waiting for moons!"

"Calm down, Brownear," the tabby meowed, then looked at the medicine cats and dipped his head. "I'm Hawktail. You're Mossrain

and Ravenpaw, correct?" He looked at both of them with wide, curious eyes. Ravenpaw was once again surprised by meeting these enemy warriors. BatClan was so different than he thought they would be. They were nice, especially when SageClan was brought into the mix. He still remembered their interruption at the Moonstream, and how rude the leader of the patrol was. The other two had stuck up for him, but after they had made fun of his Clanmates.

Sudden worry spiked his heart for when they would meet with Poppysong. Would their relationship with the SageClan medicine cat suffer because of the tension between their Clans?

"Where's Sandflight? She's okay, right?" Mossrain asked quickly, dropping the squirrel. The older tom with one missing ear tracked it with his eyes, though he swiftly took up a guarded expression to hide his obviously-hungry thoughts.

"She's fine." A new cat approached. She was bushy furred black she-cat, with kind green eyes that glowed in the darkness. It was hard to see if she was as thin as her starving Clanmates because of her thick fur that blended well into the darkness around her, but her legs were thin and it looked like skin pulled tightly over bones. She looked at her Clanmates and meowed, "no luck hunting. Everything's hiding from the cold."

"Quiet!" the one called Brownear hissed under his breath, turning to look accusingly at the two medicine cats.

"Don't hiss at me," the she-cat warned him curtly, then dipped her head to the EchoClan cats. "Please excuse my mate, he's a little grouchy. As I said, Sandflight is safe, but we have two new kits in our Clan and one--only four days old--is very weak. She needs constant attention. Sandflight is scared to leave her side." Her nose suddenly twitched, and her eyes narrowed on the prey. "Medicine cats normally don't hunt. Did it run under your paws?" There was a spark of amusement in her words, but also a little longing.

"Probably just showing off," Brownear answered with a growl. "EchoClan likes to show they have more than others."

"Actually, they are presents for Sandflight." Mossrain picked up the squirrel and set it on the Thunderpath, out of the grass. He flicked his tail, and Ravenpaw lay his sparrow beside it. "There's an herb that grows in your territory and only in your territory. Sandflight usually brings it with her, and in exchange I give her some prey."

Ravenpaw was filled with shock. Another lie! Last time they went to the Moonstream, Mossrain had lied to his own Clanmates about Sandflight giving him herbs in exchange for prey, but that had never happened. Now Mossrain was lying again--he could think of no herb that grew in BatClan's marsh and not the forest. Or was there one he didn't know about? Was Mossrain actually telling the truth?

"Sandflight never said where she got the prey every half-moon night," the she-cat murmured, her tail flicking softly. "I guess this makes the most sense."

Brownear hissed angrily, but Hawktail turned to look at him with a wise expression. "That prey probably keeps some of your Clanmates alive, Brownear, so be nice."

"Here, take it." Mossrain nosed both the pieces forward. "I can get the herbs from Sandflight another time."

"We don't take charity!" Brownear growled, fur bristling along his spine.

Ravenpaw glanced at the sky. Would they be late to the Moonstream? The moon almost looked ready to shine beautifully into the Star Cave. The other two medicine cats would be waiting for them.

"It's not charity," Mossrain responded calmly. "It's a fair trade."

"But we have nothing to trade it for. Why not wait until you actually get the herbs to give the prey?" The she-cat tilted her head curiously.

"Because we are already late to the Moonstream," Mossrain answered smoothly. "And we don't want this prey going to waste.

We both have already eaten." Mossrain flicked his tail over Ravenpaw's ears. When the cats looked at him briefly, fear shot up his spine until their eyes turned away.

"Then we will expect you tomorrow at camp." The she-cat dipped her head and crossed the Old Thunderpath, gripping the sparrow in her jaws and pulling the squirrel with her by its tail. The tom, Hawktail, grabbed it from the edge of the path and lifted it into his jaws.

"I shall be there at sunhigh," Mossrain promised with a dip of his head, then he flicked his tail and led Ravenpaw along the side of the path, towards SageClan territory. He turned his head back a few times until the BatClan cats faded from sight, then he let out a relieved sigh, but continued walking along.

"Do we actually trade prey for herbs?" Ravenpaw asked quietly, looking towards the other territory in fear they were still being watched, but it was completely silent--eerily silent.

"No, but they don't need to know that. BatClan warriors, they..." Mossrain took a moment to think of what he wanted to say. "They are very proud. As they said, they don't take charity. They don't want to seem weak in front of the other Clans."

"What about the agreement between Dawnstar and Acornstar?" Ravenpaw asked. He recalled last Moonstream meeting, where Mossrain and Sandflight had talked about something between the two leaders that Dawnstar would not--or could not--agree to.

Mossrain sighed, his tail tip twitching absent-mindedly. "You've seen Acornstar recently, Ravenpaw, do you really think she's made a deal with BatClan? Acornstar is too protective of her territory to give any part of it away, even temporarily."

"So you think the leaders... lied?" Ravenpaw murmured, watching his paws as they padded toward the end of the forest.

"I think Acornstar lied. Eagleclaw brought Goldenpool and me into Acornstar's den and asked her mother about helping BatClan. Acornstar said she had offered some hunting rights to Dawnstar in

exchange for something, but the BatClan leader had disagreed. I think when Dawnstar found out, she said it was true because she didn't want to cause trouble with an unstable, powerful leader."

Unstable. Mossrain had called his leader unstable.

"Do you think StarClan is angry with us?" Ravenpaw whispered, faltering to a stop.

"What? Why would they be?" Mossrain stopped and turned to look at him, eyes glazed over with worry. Shadows reflected from their hazel depths.

"Because we're disrespecting Acornstar, our leader," Ravenpaw explained. "I know she's wrong about her current thoughts and actions, but doesn't that make me disloyal? And as Clan cats, don't we have to listen to our leader, even if they're wrong? "

"As medicine cats, we have slightly different standings," Mossrain began slowly, obviously picking his words very carefully. "Yes, we should still always listen to our leader, but our leader also has to listen to us. It'll all work out in the end, Ravenpaw, I promise. Perhaps StarClan will give us some guidance tonight. But we have to get there in time first." He rested his tail briefly on Ravenpaw's shoulder, then with a nod the two hurried back on their path.

The moon was high in the sky when they finally neared the Star Cave, with no cats to be seen. Ravenpaw and Mossrain both had their fur bushed up, protecting them from the cold wind. With the current of air rushing towards them from the direction of the Moonstream, Ravenpaw faintly recognized the scent of the other two medicine cats. Worry spiked through him that Poppysong and Hawkstream had started without them, but when they peaked through the entrance they found the two cats sitting to the side of the Star Cave, talking quietly about herbs.

"Finally!" Poppysong gasped. "We thought you weren't going to show!" The tan-brown tabby she-cat touched Mossrain's nose with hers, but Ravenpaw, before she could touch his, faked a sneeze. Luckily, it stopped the she-cat from moving forward again.

"I hope that's not the beginning of a sickness," Hawkstream meowed, getting slowly to her paws and stepping forward. Ravenpaw noticed the ginger she-cat looked even older than the last time he had seen her. Her muzzle was beginning to gray, and her eartips were paling. Her eyes, as well, looked a little duller.

"No, I think I got something in my nose." Ravenpaw felt awful about lying, but he knew it was best if his ability to see the future was kept secret, even from other medicine cats. He been getting good at not using it, but it still hurt to know he would never be able to touch another cat's nose without getting a terrifying vision.

Hawkstream nodded in belief, then asked, "where's Sandflight?"

"She stayed at her camp," Mossrain explained. "She has newborn kits, apparently, and must watch them because one is sick."

"Poor scrap," Poppysong sighed. "I hope it survives. Do you think Sandflight needs any herbs to help her?"

"If she does, she'll ask." Hawkstream fluffed out her coat. "She's proud, but not so proud she'll let a cat die, especially a kit. If she needs herbs, she'll ask someone for help."

Mossrain and Poppysong both nodded in agreement. "It is already late, shall we share with our ancestors?" Mossrain meowed, then padded to the side of the Moonstream, crouching down next to the smooth-moving water. Ravenpaw pressed against his side briefly to take some warmth for himself.

Poppysong and Hawkstream settled on Mossrain's other side quietly, twitching their whiskers. "StarClan, show us your guidance," Hawkstream whispered.

Everything soon faded away into silence, and Ravenpaw fell into a peaceful sleep.

When he opened his eyes, he was in the familiar StarClan clearing, empty of life except for a chirping bird.

"Ravenpaw."

He turned at the sound of the smooth voice, happiness filling him when he saw Berrywhisker standing there. Purring, he flicked his tail his greeting. "How are you?" he asked her, with a pang of longing. He never knew he cared for her this much until he saw her in StarClan--it was almost like he only started caring about her truly and completely once she was gone. He never realized the impact the elder had on his life.

"I'm good. I have someone who wants to meet you." She turned her head to the undergrowth behind her, and a strange she-cat came out. Muscles rippled under her red-ginger coat, while her white paws and muzzle gleamed, coated in stars. Her green eyes glowed with gratitude. She dipped her head.

"I am Violetfrost," she said softly. "I come from a distant home, one full of chaos and destruction, where I broke the rules and took a mate, despite my Clan's law." Surprise ran through Ravenpaw, but he forced himself to stay quiet. "My mate and I left, following the word from a group of cats we had captured. They spoke of Clans that respected their own and had compassion for those who needed it. But on our journey, I realized I was expecting kits. My mate, Rainshadow, found a den where I could rest while he went home to find a cat that could help, despite the many dangers he faced by doing so.

"But he did not return soon enough, and I gave birth to three kits. Soon, though, one died. I was just returning from hunting for the other two when I was attacked by a fox in my den. I accepted that I had no way to live, but right before death took me, two toms came and tried to save me. I died, but they took my kits with them. They could not care for them, but instead gave them to someone who could. Your Clan." She looked down at her paws, where a small ginger tomkit with glowing green eyes appeared. "This is Tumble," she whispered.

Ravenpaw felt his heart sink as he stared at the tiny cat that died in the EchoClan nursery. "I'm sorry we couldn't save him," Ravenpaw said quietly.

"My daughter is still alive, so apart of me is, too," Violetfrost replied. "Her name is Maple, and she will be a great warrior for EchoClan one day, I promise."

Ravenpaw looked down at his paws, silent.

"My mate returned to our den yesterday," Violetfrost continued quietly. "He does not know that one kit still lives. He must be told, and he must be accepted into your Clan as one of your own." Ravenpaw looked up, and saw her eyes were suddenly hard and unreadable, and her voice turned deep and serious. "The rain will explain the flames and save the Clans from the approaching darkness."

Suddenly, Ravenpaw's eyes were taken over, and he was seeing himself walking along the Old Thunderpath, and into unclaimed territory. He skirted trees and bushes and followed invisible trails until he reached the entrance of a large cave, where blue eyes shined from the darkness.

Sorry for slow updates, and no questions at the end of chapters, even though the plot is really moving. I am SSSSSSOOOOOOO excited for the far future of this story, where I have a lot of it planned out except for one thing: the POV. But I don't want to spoil it even though I really need opinions, so I'll probably go somewhere else on the internet and find out what I should do. Anyways, I really hope you're enjoying the story.

Question #1: What do you think Ravenpaw should do with this new information of a new Clan? Should he keep it hidden, or reveal it to his mentor and Clan?

Question #2: Is the prophecy okay? It was made to be simple, because Ravenpaw is young and Violetfrost wants him to understand (mostly)

Question #3: Speaking of the prophecy, what do you think Violetfrost meant by it? *The rain will explain the flames and save the Clans from the approaching darkness.*

Also, I forgot to mention, I have an important announcement!!!!!! Even though I'm only two books in, I two VERY important Special Editions coming out eventually, which I'm extremely excited about. The first will explain more of the new Clan, and will feature both Violetfrost and Rainshadow when they were still in their old Clan. Here is the description for Leafkit's Agony:

While living in EchoClan, CrowClan, SageClan, and even BatClan is harmony, living in the fifth Clan is not. A moon's time travel from the territories reveals a new group of cats, NightClan, ferocious warriors that are nothing like their other Clan counterparts. inside this evil Clan, young Leafkit emerges into a terrifying life.

By the way, it is called Leafkit's Agony because I don't want any spoilers for her warrior name, which she'll obviously live to or it would be a pretty boring story. Or, will SHE????????

Anywaysssssssss, the second one I'm also very excited for, and perhaps you guys will be more or less excited by this one than the last one, Acornstar's Misery:

Clouded Skies hints and searches some of Acornstar's past, but now it's time to go back and watch her life unfold, and see where she went wrong.

Let me know if you're excited for them, and which one you want me to focus more on! Or, do you want me to pay more attention to this story? The Special Editions are more for when I have writer's block for this story but not for Warriors in general, but I can always just force myself on this one in my free time.

Chapter Twenty

Ravenpaw was suddenly awake beside the Moonstream, pale dawnlight flooding through the gaps in the ceiling. Slowly, the other medicine cats woke beside him, but he stared sightlessly into the wall. *The rain will explain the flames and save the Clans from the approaching darkness.* The beginning and end was clear enough-- Violetfrost's mate was named Rainshadow, and he would save them from the darkness approaching the Clan. But how could he explain flames? What could be explained from fire? Would the forest burn down, but he would save the Clans by helping them?

"Ravenpaw, are you okay?" Mossrain's nose gently touched his shoulder, and the apprentice forced himself to nod, looking at his mentor. Mossrain looked unconvinced, and said to the other medicine cats, "I'm sorry, but Ravenpaw and I don't have the time to talk, we have injured cats to take care of."

Poppysong raised her head, curious. "Injured cats? What happened?" she asked, sounding worried. Mossrain seemed unable to leave her empty pawed.

"A dog attacked one of our apprentices and fractured her spine, and we fought a small battle with them to get them away from our territory. Many of our cats were injured, one quite fatally. We also have a new kit in our Clan, found at our border. Goldenpool has to focus on helping her, so she can't be much help in the medicine den while we're gone."

"A fractured spine?" Hawkstream's eyes opened wide. "Thank StarClan it wasn't broken! I've seen both in CrowClan, with apprentices and even warriors falling out of the Giant Oak after being dared or challenged to climb up."

Mossrain's gaze lit with an excited fire in their depths. "So you know how long fractures take to heal?" he rushed, claws sliding out and crossing over the ground as he anxiously scratched a paw.

Hawkstream nodded. "Broken ones will never heal, but depending on the fracture, maybe two moons, possibly more or less. Make sure the apprentice stays still in a comfortable nest. Once the pain has died down, they can start small exercises, but be careful about jumping until the cat feels no pain at all. I've found having them swim is a good way to get their muscles used to moving again. Feel free to bring the injured apprentice to our camp once she can make the journey a moon or so after she starts exercising, and I can show you the deep pond I use at the edge of our territory."

Mossrain nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes, yes! Thank you so much, Hawkstream! If you need anything, please tell me and I'll be glad to help you!"

Hawkstream, seemingly amused, dipped her head. "Of course. Perhaps I can visit later on and see the injury."

"Definitely!" Mossrain's tail rose into the air. "Come by any time!"

Hawkstream lowered her head briefly once again. "I believe you have somewhere to be?" she meowed in amusement.

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten!" His paws bounced happily on the soft ground of the Star Cave. He waved his tail in goodbye as he hurried from the Moonstream's side, and Ravenpaw rushed to keep up with him.

Ravenpaw knew he should be happy, to know that Blossompaw would heal, but his mind was still distracted. He had thought a lot when Mossrain had been talking, and he was overloaded with thoughts. Just to think that another Clan was out there... But this wasn't like the Clans he knew, was it? Violetfrost said it was a place of chaos and destruction, where cats weren't allowed mates. But, how did they have kits? He swiftly decided it was more complicated than that. And there was a cat waiting where she had died, probably stuck in mourning for the loss of his mate and kits. But he had no idea that his daughter lived.

The rain will explain the flames and save the Clans from the approaching darkness.

This cat, Rainshadow, would be able to answer all the questions he had. Except for one.

Should I tell Mossrain? He was worried about what would happen if his Clan found out about a new one, far away but dangerous enough cats would flee to a place they didn't know even existed or not. What sane cat could ever leave their Clan unless it was a horrible place?

There was already so much stress in the Clan, with Acornstar how she was. And like Mossrain said, they had two very injured cats and weak ones all throughout the Clan, mostly with sore legs or shoulders, and a new kit. Eagleclaw had so much on her shoulders, as did Mossrain and Goldenpool.

Could they all really handle the knowledge of another Clan?

No, he decided. *They couldn't.* He couldn't tell the three cats. He would have to find Rainshadow on his own, and talk with the tom on what he wanted to do. Perhaps Ravenpaw could say he went out looking for herbs, and stumbled upon the tom, looking for his kits? Maybe he could convince Eagleclaw--and Rainshadow if need be--that he and his kit should join the Clan for protection from foxes and badgers and rogues, and not an evil Clan that may come to hunt them down.

An evil Clan may come to hunt them down...

Would that put his Clan in danger?

StarClan, help me, he thought up to the lightening, eyes sparkling with fear.

"Ravenpaw, what did you dream?" Mossrain's mew surprised him.

"What?" His mind had been elsewhere, and though he heard the question, he wanted to hear it again.

"What did StarClan show you? It is obviously bothering you greatly."

Ravenpaw looked at his paws for a moment, trying to think.

"Berrywhisker came to me, with the tomkit that died." He looked at his mentor just as the tom's head turned away in sadness. "His name is Tumble, and his sister is Maple. Berrywhisker said Maple would make a good warrior one day, one every cat could be proud to have in their Clan." He knew not to mention Violetfrost, and to exaggerate the truth just a little, to make it more likely the kit could be accepted.

Mossrain nodded. "Maple... A good name, if turned to Maplekit."

Ravenpaw agreed with a similar nod. To change the subject, he asked, "do you think Acornstar will agree to let us bring Blossompaw to CrowClan territory, and to let Hawkstream come to our camp?"

"We don't even know if Blossompaw *will* go to CrowClan territory," Mossrain responded, seeming to brighten just a bit as they moved away from the past topic. "But it will be a good try-- they have the only real pond in all the territories deep enough for a cat to swim, rivers are too shallow and fast for a cat to practice exercising their muscles."

"But what about Acornstar?" Ravenpaw asked softly, scared about approaching the leader and asking for something so out there, in such a bad time.

Mossrain hesitated for a moment. "Acornstar is not in the position to tell us what to do, is she?" he said it so softly Ravenpaw thought he wasn't supposed to hear. Slowly, Mossrain quickened his pace to get to the trees sooner.

Sure enough, at this quick pace, they made it to the forest in no time and passed over the fresh scent markings. Mossrain led him in the immediate direction of the camp, but they had barely begun moving before the undergrowth trembled, and a patrol stepped out. Instantly, Ravenpaw's mind cleared at the sight of his father and older brothers, Stonecoat and Shadefur. His stomach growled to remind him of his hunger when he noticed Shadefur holding two voles by their tails.

Mossrain purred in gratitude as one was set in front of him.

"Thanks, Shadefur. How's your ear?" He peaked at the open, healing wound.

"It hurts when it touches things in the forest, but other than that I only notice it when there's a breeze." Mossrain purred again, this time in amusement.

"My leg is okay, too," Stonecoat put in. Mossrain seemed surprised, almost like he had forgotten the other tom was there.

"Oh, uh, good, I'm glad. Just don't overexert yourself, alright?" He waited until the tom nodded before looking back at Shadefur. Stonecoat shifted on his paws, like he was upset his littermate was getting more attention than he was.

"How was the Moonpool?" Boulderclaw asked softly, touching Ravenpaw's cheek with his nose. The small black apprentice curled into his scent, feeling relaxed.

Knowing he wasn't allowed to talk about what happened, he said cryptically, "it was... interesting."

Boulderclaw snorted in amusement. "Fair enough." He licked Ravenpaw's ear, and it flicked from the contact on instinct. "I'm still very proud of you. Being a medicine cat isn't an easy job."

"Harder than being a warrior?" Ravenpaw felt scared he had chosen a bad path. Yes, he loved being a medicine cat, but it was challenging, remembering all the herbs. One day, he would have to do it alone. How would he fair without Mossrain guiding him? Fear and anxiety swallowed him like an open mouth, welcoming him into their cold, chilling depths.

Boulderclaw calmed him by giving him a simple, loving nuzzle. "A warrior and a medicine cat are very different. Both face different challenges but can face them together. One cannot live without the other. With no medicine cats, warriors could not heal from injuries. Without warriors, medicine cats would have no purpose. It is the circle of Clan life."

Ravenpaw noticed his older brothers and mentor had been

listening, and the three looked at Boulderclaw with awe and pride at being his Clanmate. Ravenpaw's gaze glowed as he stared at the powerful form of his father. Such a wise, strong, caring cat. No one could ask for a better Clanmate, nor a better father. He tucked his head under his father's chest and took a deep breath of his foresty scent.

And all his worries swept away.

Ravenpaw returned to camp with a full belly and a clear mind, what he had seen in StarClan forgotten. Stonecoat stomped off to the fresh-kill pile to deposit a finch he had caught, and Boulderclaw left Ravenpaw's side to follow him. Shadefur and Mossrain spoke quietly, heads down and tails flicking. They parted with Mossrain letting out a purr of amusement. Ravenpaw had no idea they were so close.

Mossrain noticed him watching and nodded to the medicine cat's den. "Let's look in on our patients, shall we?" He padded to the den without looking back at the clearing. Ravenpaw followed him, feeling relief as the scent of herbs washed over him as he slipped through the entrance. His eyes immediately focused on the form of Blossompaw, laying in her nest with a mouse on her paws.

Jaypaw was sat next to her, enjoying a vole. Ravenpaw's heart soared when he noticed an actual happy gleam in Blossompaw's gaze, but it died quickly when the two medicine cats entered. He felt his heart plummet to his paws in sadness.

"How are you, Blossompaw?" Mossrain asked, sounding excited.

"Impatient!" the she-cat snapped, all her calm from just a few moments ago gone. "When can I get out of this nest?"

Worry spiked Jaypaw's gaze, and Ravenpaw noticed flattened moss at the front of the nest. It seemed Blossompaw had tried an escape, but was kept back by her brother.

"Hawkstream has had cats injure their spine before," Mossrain began, "and they can heal. It'll take awhile, but once you start feeling better and don't feel pain from the actual injury you can get

up and start exercising, but only if you don't leave your nest before the time is right."

Blossompaw sighed angrily, rolling her eyes. "You still didn't answer! When will I heal?"

"Hawkstream guesses two moons, but she can't be sure. She says she'll come visit soon and be able to check."

Blossompaw back fur rose. "An enemy in our camp?" she growled.

"Medicine cats aren't the enemy. None of the Clans are," Mossrain argued softly. "Now, stop being unpleasant--I have other things to do then listen to you complain." Ravenpaw was surprised by Mossrain's words, and so was Blossompaw. Her eyes lowered after a moment, looking angry but also embarrassed.

"Mossrain?" Eagleclaw poked her head into the den.

The medicine cat turned, and dipped his head. "Everything alright?"

Eagleclaw stepped completely into the den. "I wanted to let you know what happened with the meeting, about SageClan." Instantly, Jaypaw and Blossompaw pricked their ears.

Mossrain noticed the movement. "Follow me into the back den, we can talk privately." He began to lead his deputy back into the darkness, when he turned to Ravenpaw and said, "you may be young, but you're a medicine cat. You deserve to hear." He flicked his tail for his apprentice to follow, and, after casting a worried but also slightly excited glance at his brother, he followed his mentor and deputy.

The darkness of the small tunnel swallowed him quickly, but his eyes adjusted and soon they arrived into the small second den. Mossrain went to the back where a small pile of moss was, and spread it out as a small covering from the cold floor. The three settled on it, but Ravenpaw still felt freezing veins of ice rush his body when he sat.

"So, what's going to happen?" Mossrain asked as they got as comfortable as possible, which wasn't much.

"I don't know, exactly," Eagleclaw admitted. "Grayblaze and Silverstrike think a battle is the only way, while Frostfall and Maskdapple both admit one will happen eventually. Oakcloud and Boulderclaw, it seems, are the only sensible ones. They both agree it would be stupid to cause a battle over something so small, especially at a time where many of our warriors are still weak."

"And what do *you* think? It sounds like you side with Oakcloud and Boulderclaw." Mossrain's tail flicked softly.

"I do," Eagleclaw said softly, "but that's not how I want to do things like this. The Clan decides, not me."

Ravenpaw noted how much she sounded like a leader, so different from her mother. Acornstar decided everything herself, but it was obvious Eagleclaw already planned to lead by letting her cats choose their own future.

"I think we should gather the entire Clan, and have the cats vote. Two categories--fight, or don't fight. Whichever has more, we will do. If more of my cats want to fight, I will ignore my feelings of wanting peace, and prepare the warriors for battle. If more cats wish for another way, I will find it. But I will not choose how these cats live the next few moons."

Mossrain nodded his understanding. "I respect that thinking," the tom said slowly, then added, "but what of the warriors who are unsure? Maskdapple and Frostfall seem undecided, as many others likely will be. Forcing them to choose could make them go into the side for fight. I know you say you want them to have the freedom to choose, but we can still point them in a better direction. Perhaps, we add a third category to choose--undecided."

"But what if so many cats choose 'undecided' that only a few are actually choosing the future of our Clan?" Eagleclaw asked. "The entire Clan must choose."

"Then make a speech," Mossrain answered.

"About what? How I don't want a battle? Then the cats will likely choose to not fight just because they know it's what I want."

Eagleclaw's eyes shined with worry.

"Then don't say it straight out," the young medicine cat meowed. "Tell them they are deciding the future of the Clan, and that the battle will mean a change in the life of the kits and warriors of the Clan. Yes, SageClan might deserve to be taught a lesson, but it would also put us in danger for future battles, and those battles could endanger our kits. Take a bit of both sides, but make sure they know what they are voting for."

Eagleclaw nodded in understanding, seemingly more calm. "That's a good idea. Thank you, Mossrain."

The tom brightened, flicking his tail. "Of course. Anything else?"

Eagleclaw looked lost in thought for a moment, then asked, "should I allow the apprentices to vote? Brightpaw and Petalpaw are practically warriors, I might hold their warrior assessment this week, so they should get to vote. But Russetdawn and Snowfern's litter are both young, and may be influenced by older denmates or parents."

"That's true, but they should get to vote on their future. That's what you're going to tell the Clan, afterall. That they are fighting for themselves and the future of their Clan. So, why shouldn't the newer generation decide? I bet most of the apprentices will be in the battle, anyways, if it happens," Mossrain meowed. Then, surprisngly, he looked at Ravenpaw. "What do you think?"

Ravenpaw knew his opinion would likely mean nothing to Eagleclaw, but he voiced the truth anyways. "I-I guess they should be allowed to vote. Like Mossrain said, it's their future."

Eagleclaw nodded, most likely in response to what Mossrain had said, and not what Ravenpaw had contributed. "Then it's decided. I'll direct Acornstar on what to say." The deputy stood up and started from the second den, leaving Mossrain in shock. After a moment, a shudder went through him, and he hurried after his deputy.

"Eagleclaw!" he called, and she looked back with a guilty gaze. She

had known Mossrain would stop her. "I don't think it's the best idea to have Acornstar call this meeting. Yes, she is leader by name, but *you* are the one in charge in all other senses. She is not... *mentally* able to decide this. We both know she will decide on battle, but her vote cannot be taken into account because of her current troubles. And surely you realize the Clan would rather listen to you than her, especially after her public degrading of everybody in the Clan? She has called her warriors and medicine cats traitors, and fought with you over the death of a poor kit. In most ways, she is the one that is the traitor, an outcast in her own Clan."

Ravenpaw shivered as his mentor spoke, and curled closer to the moss under him.

Eagleclaw dropped her head, and was quiet for a few moments. "You're right," she whispered. "Of course you are. I will call a meeting. Will you stand with me?" Fear lightened her eyes. Ravenpaw realized this was one of the first time Eagleclaw would be calling a Clan meeting, doing something a leader should be doing.

Mossrain was right, he realized. In all senses except name, Eagleclaw was his leader.

Question #1: Do you think EchoClan will fight SageClan?

Question #2: If they fight, who do you think will win?

Chapter Twenty-One

"Will all cats old enough to hunt for their Clan come to me for a Clan meeting!"

Ravenpaw watched from the entrance of the medicine cat's den as Eagleclaw stood upon the Rock Pile, fur ruffled in the wind and eyes shining strongly. She stood with power, muscles rippling. A little behind her, Mossrain sat with a straight back and surprising grace, eyes betraying nothing.

Slowly, warriors crawled from dens or corners of the clearing, and the apprentices gathered excitedly in front of their den, chatting up a storm, before settling closer to the Rock Pile. They whispered excitedly to each other while warriors sat down in silence, watching their deputy with curiosity.

Once every cat had settled, Eagleclaw revealed a bit of hesitation, breaking her powerful persona, but then she covered it back up. "Mossrain and I have decided that you, the Clan, will choose whether or not we go into battle with SageClan. In order to do this, I will have all of you get into a line and come up one at the time. If you believe that we should look for a peaceful solution, or even wait awhile before fighting, you will sit over there, in the open area between the elders' den and medicine cat's den, not far from Ravenpaw."

The apprentice shivered in his fur at the mention of his name, and he hated how all gazes followed Eagleclaw's sweeping tail over to him.

"If you wish to fight now, in the next quarter moon, you will sit in front of the waterfall." She flicked her tail to the open area. "But, before you decide, I want you all to sit for a few moments, and think. Many of our warriors are still injured from the fight with the dogs, and will be weaker than others when they fight. Also, apprentices will join us in battle, so be warned that your kits, or the kits of your friends, will be injured. Because of this, they will also

be allowed to vote."

The apprentices mewled in excitement, most likely already discussing where they stood. A part of Ravenpaw longed to over with them, but he stayed put. At least he wasn't the only one missing. Blossompaw was still sleeping in her nest, with Jaypaw watching over her. He had, surprisingly, decided to stay in the den and not join the meeting.

"But also remember that if you fight, you will be doing it for your Clan. SageClan has mocked our weakness and mocked our warriors. Fighting brings honor, as long as you use your skills with mercy and intelligence. In battle, we don't hurt those already beaten and do not use claws where they should not be used. We do not go for eyes or for the throat, but we still fight to win. When fighting, remember you are attacking cats with a family who will worry when they're injured, and mourn if they leave to StarClan. Do not fight to kill, but still also to win. Be brave, be strong, and make the right choice."

She nodded for the choosing to begin, and sat next to Mossrain.

Instantly, warriors and apprentices got into a disorganized line, crowding together. The first few warriors were Silverstrike, Boulderclaw, Stonecoat, and Shadefur. Instantly, Silverstrike trotted over to the waterfall and sat right out of reach of the spray. Boulderclaw turned to his two sons and said, "choose what you want, not what you think I want you to." Then he padded over to Ravenpaw, and settled next to his son, giving him a loving lick on the ear.

The two brothers, as always, went up together. They looked at each other and seemed to have a silent conversation with their eyes. After a moment, Shadefur jerked his head and started for Silverstrike. Ravenpaw noticed sadness from his father, but it was quickly covered up. But Shadefur paused when he realized his brother wasn't following and watched him with surprise as Stonecoat lowered his head, looking sad, and pattered over to Boulderclaw. Shadefur seemed to hesitate on his original decision, but then he shook his head, and went to Silverstrike, settling on his haunches.

Grayblaze came up next and didn't even hesitate to go over to the waterfall. Frostfall took a few moments, looking at both sides, before finally settling in front of the elders' den. Thorntail went the same way as Maskdapple, with the latter touching her mate's pale nose with her own.

"I'm glad you understand," Silverstrike whispered to her. She settled next to him with a slightly guilty expression. Pebblepeak gazed sadly at his parents but practically ran to the opposite side. Brightpaw followed him, while Petalpaw joined their parents. Ravenpaw wasn't surprised by Pebblepeak's decision. After all, his secret mate, Squirrelleap, belonged to SageClan.

Ravenpaw reflected suddenly on how close the two litters were. They were about seven moons apart but born from the same parents. It was then Ravenpaw realized that not only was Pebblepeak Mossrain's brother, but so was Petalpaw, and Brightpaw his sister.

Oakcloud decided against the fight, while Flamepaw and Firepaw both were eager to prove their strength against another Clan. Willowpaw curled into Boulderclaw's side when it was her turn. Foxpounce had a determined look on his face when he joined his fellow warriors next to the waterfall. It seemed he wanted to take out his anger of his mate's injury on SageClan. Featherpaw touched her nose to Willowpaw's shoulder in kindness.

The last cat was Snowfern. And she froze at her decision.

Ravenpaw knew why. The side that wanted not to fight was only one behind. If she chooses not to battle SageClan, the numbers would be even.

It seems Eagleclaw knew this, too. "Snowfern, choose what you want, no matter what it does to the Clan."

Snowfern blinked, nodded, and murmurs followed her form as she walked slowly, paws stepping softly over the ground, and then she sat, head down.

Eagleclaw nodded somberly. "We are at a tie."

Snowfern lowered her head into Boulderclaw's shoulder.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Every head turned at the sound of the growl, looking to the entrance of the leader's den where Acornstar had appeared, unnoticed, and crossed the pool of water. Eagleclaw's eyes flooded with guilt, but then she quickly covered it.

"We are deciding the future of our Clan," the deputy meowed evenly.

"Without consulting *me*?" Acornstar hissed, fur bristling.

Silverstrike snorted in amusement. "What did you think we were going to do? Let your corrupted mind force us to do something we might not want to? A kit could lead better than you can."

Many cats muttered to themselves at the tom's comment. Ravenpaw felt himself slink low to the ground, and his father pressed closer to him. *StarClan, please help my Clan.*

"Watch what you say to me!" Acornstar growled.

"Or what? You'll banish me?" a mocking tone came into his mew. Almost all the warriors were now uncomfortable. Cats shifted on their paws uncertainly. Though most of them knew Silverstrike spoke the truth, it was not wise to talk bad about your leader--especially to their face--no matter how unsteady they were. Only Grayblaze and Thorntail looked like they agreed with Silverstrike, both sitting proudly. Maskdapple looked furious, gazing at her mate with a wave of flaming anger.

Maskdapple was a very forthright warrior, always outspoken about what she thought, though it seemed she was conflicted. After all, if she was siding with Acornstar, she would most definitely speak against her mate, but she was also not one to break the warrior code or go against her leader. She would side with Acornstar if she had to, but it seemed at this moment she wasn't ready to openly voice her opinion.

Acornstar looked lost for words at the Silverstrike's statement, and

it was actually Eagleclaw who spoke first. "Silverstrike, do not speak bad about Acornstar, she is still your leader." Eagleclaw jumped down the rocks and stood face to face with her mother, her tail flicking softly to betray her calm expression. "But he does speak the truth, somewhat. You are not in the right mindset to deal with this. I was hoping to save you the stress."

"By deciding the future of my Clan?" Acornstar growled.

Sadness sparked Eagleclaw's eyes. "Please, just listen to what I'm saying. Surely you realize you cannot rightfully decide whether to fight SageClan or not?"

The leader's fur bristled and her ears flattened even more than it already was. "'Cannot rightfully decide'?" Acornstar mocked, voice becoming hard. "If you're so determined to lead this Clan, then go ahead. You try to be leader for the next few days. And I'll just be any other warrior." She stepped back with a determined expression. "And as 'any other warrior', I vote we fight." Her lips curled in a demented excitement. "So, my dear *leader*," she practically spat the word, "do. What. You. Must."

Eagleclaw watched in fear as her mother turned and stalked away. Surprisingly, the leader didn't go into her den but instead left the camp with her claws scraping over the ground, her fur messy with anger. The deputy stood there, quiet in shock, and the Clan sat uncomfortably in silence. Then, finally:

"You heard her. We fight. We shall challenge SageClan at dawn in two days from now." Stiff-legged, Eagleclaw stalked to her mother's den, leaping over the stepping stones. As she disappeared into the shadows, the forgotten warriors looked around in confusion at each other.

"What do we do now?" It was Frostfall who asked the question, but it was echoed by a few other cats as well. Mutters followed her question, nothing helpful.

Then a tom stood, raising his head high. "It's decided. We'll fight. Stonecoat and Shadefur will take Petalpaw, Brightpaw, and Willowpaw onto the moor for battle practice. Pebblepeak,

Thorntail, and Frostfall will train Flamepaw, Firepaw, and Featherpaw in the hollow training as well. Maskdapple, you will lead Oakcloud and Snowfern hunting in the forest. Foxpounce, you will guard the camp with Grayblaze."

Silverstrike now turned to look at Boulderclaw. "We'll stay in camp as well, to help Eagleclaw."

Boulderclaw nodded in response to his brother. Slowly, still a little uncertain, the Clan got up to follow the tom's orders. Ravenpaw said a quick goodbye to his parents, then disappeared into his den, watching Mossrain as he hurried after Eagleclaw, followed by Silverstrike and Boulderclaw.

But that was okay. Ravenpaw's mind was fuzzy with the happenings of the day, and after his tiring journey to and from the Star Cave, he just wanted to curl up into his warm nest and sleep the rest of the day away. But as he stepped inside the den, he found himself facing Jaypaw. Yes, he loved his brother and wanted to be close to him, but he was tired and overstimulated and wanted to rest. He resisted the sudden urge to pass his brother without speaking just to get to his nest sooner.

"I was listening," Jaypaw said softly. "We're really fighting SageClan?" Fear fluttered in his gaze, and Ravenpaw realized his brother probably didn't want a battle any more than he did himself. After all, Jaypaw had experienced two enemy attacks in his life--once when Blossompaw was injured, and when the Clan attacked the dogs and Twolegs. Both had ended up with cats gravely injured. Of course, that would be Blossompaw and Russetdawn, both in the den with them, one sleeping off poppy seeds and the other having been unconscious for quite a while.

"I think so," Ravenpaw answered quietly. "I'm sorry, Jaypaw, but I'm really tired after going to the Star Cave, and I just want to sleep." He immediately felt awful for blowing off his brother, but a sleepy fog was clouding his mind, stronger than he had experienced before. A whisper in his mind told him something was wrong, but he ignored it, having had a similar thought every time something was slightly weird or wrong.

Jaypaw purred softly. "It's alright. I'm a little tired, too. It's been a long, rather uneventful day." He cast a look at Blossompaw, blinking sadly. "She'll understand eventually, I know it. We just have to wait." He looked back at his brother. "Go ahead and sleep. I might as well stay with her, as I *do* like being in her company. Reminds me of the old days in the nursery, I guess. If only Willowpaw was in here, perhaps we could share some stories." Sadness shined in his eyes, obviously remembering easier days.

Ravenpaw shared the look in his own yellow gaze, and he rubbed his chin against his brother's briefly before heading over to his nest. Surprisingly, he even stumbled slightly.

"Are you okay?" Jaypaw asked, sounding worried.

"Just tired..." Ravenpaw mumbled, then added so quietly his brother wouldn't here, "I think..."

His legs felt weak, and his vision was blurring. He barely made it to his nest, collapsing into the soft moss. Almost immediately, his eyelids fluttered closed, and he had no choice but to embrace the darkness that surrounded him.

Blackness swirled around Ravenpaw's vision, revealing nothing but endless shadows. He tried to call out, but no sound came from his throat. Instead, a slightly-familiar voice echoed in his ears.

"The rain will explain the flames and save the Clans from the approaching darkness."

It was Violetfrost.

As she finished speaking, brightness flashed in his vision as he once again found himself on the Old Thunderpath, just over the ground but not feeling the rough surface. He seemed to be floating. He followed the path out of the Clans territories, then left it behind to follow an invisible trail, slipping past bushes and trees without feeling them brush against his fur, even when he touched them by accident. Soon enough, just like last time, he found himself in a small clearing, staring at a gaping cave entrance, where two blue eyes glared at him through the dark.

"Find him," Violetfrost meowed quietly, then released her hold on him.

Ravenpaw's eyes blinked open into the medicine cat's den. Bright sunlight shined into the den, telling him he had not slept for long, yet the fog of sleep was completely gone from his mind. Instead, energy coursed through his muscles, creating a soft yearning for exercise to rid himself of the overstimulating feeling. His whiskers twitched as his head rose, ears flicking.

He stared out into nothing for a few moments, his mind whirling in thought. Part of him had thought the tiredness had been weird, and it turns out he was right. It seems Violetfrost had been trying to force him into sleep so she could send him the vision again. She *really* wanted her mate found.

And now excitement was filling Ravenpaw at the idea of meeting the tom. Part of it almost didn't seem to be from him. Perhaps, once again, Violetfrost was influencing his actions. But another part of it was his own excitement. He suddenly realized all the questions he had for the tom. What was this new Clan? Why couldn't he and Violetfrost be together? What was the meaning of the prophecy? There were many others he knew he would end up asking, but for now, he knew he just needed to get there.

But fear ran through him at the idea of going alone. But he didn't want to tell Mossrain, he had too much to deal with. Goldenpool was out of the question, as well. She had to take care of her kits. And Eagleclaw, too, though he trusted her, she was busy planning a battle. *Maybe Boulderclaw or Snowfern could help...* But he quickly shot back the idea. They were planning a battle, too.

Then he spotted something in the side of his unfocused vision. Jaypaw was resting quietly next to Blossompaw's nest. Then, he noticed his sister was staring at him. After a few moments of her cold light green eyes bearing into his large yellow gaze, she turned her head away and rested it on her paws. Swallowing and clearing his sadness away, Ravenpaw focused on the sleeping gray and white form of his brother.

Jaypaw. Jaypaw could come with. His brother knew the territory better than he did, and would be good company. His mind flashed

back to the memory of the dogs attacking them and Blossompaw the last time they were alone, but then he forced it away. The dogs were gone. They were safe.

But we're going into unfamiliar territory, he reminded himself. He had no idea if there would be foxes or badgers or other enemy cats that may attack. After all, a fox had killed Violetfrost not that long ago. While it was likely long gone by now, there might be others. But, if Ravenpaw followed the trail directly, he would soon find Rainshadow, and the tom could protect them.

Yes. That's what he would do. He would ask Jaypaw to come--surely he would agree?--and they would find Rainshadow, and ask him about his life before bringing him back to the Clan. But how would the Clan react? They were busy, as Ravenpaw had already realized, and might not be too open to accepting new Clan members, especially a strange warrior from a strange Clan.

But Ravenpaw pushed the thoughts back. He could decide that later, with Rainshadow adding his own input. After all, he was already warrior age, and old enough to have kits. He was likely smarter than Ravenpaw was, and would know better. He could be as old as Boulderclaw, or young as Shadefur and Stonecoat. Either way, he would definitely be smarter than a seven-moon-old apprentice.

With his mind made up, Ravenpaw padded past his sleeping brother and into the camp clearing. It seemed he had been sleeping long enough for some of the patrols to return. He spotted Stonecoat and Shadefur sharing a small rabbit, and, knowing they had been with Petalpaw, Brightpaw, and Willowpaw, he knew his sister was in camp. Maskdapple's patrol seemed to still be out, though, as the tortoiseshell, Oakcloud and Snowfern were not to be seen, and the fresh-kill pile only had a few pieces of prey on it. But at the thought, his stomach growled in hunger.

Deciding food was most important if he was to go adventuring, he quickly padded over to the pile, nosing around the pieces until he found a small, cold vole. The warriors, those hunting and fighting for their Clan, deserved the better prey, like the tasty warm mouse near his whiskers. After finishing the small meal, he cleaned his

muzzle with a few flicks of his tongue then hurried to the apprentices' den. It seemed luck was on his side today, for his sister appeared as he approached, ruffling her short white and black coat.

Her nose twitched as his scent came to her, and her eyes lit with happiness when she turned to look at him. "Hey, I was just coming to check on you and Jaypaw! You seemed a little sad after the meeting, but Boulderclaw suggested I wait a little while. Are you okay? You still look a little weird." Worry spiked in her gaze momentarily.

Ravenpaw now realized he had been flicking his tail, anxious to get going on his secret mission. He forced it still. "Yeah, I'm alright. I think I just need some time out of camp, so I decided to stock up on some herbs for leaf-bare. I was hoping you could keep an eye on Blossompaw and Russetdawn so Jaypaw could come with me. I think he needs it."

Willowpaw nodded agreement. "Yeah, I think so, too. Fighting against those dogs really scared him. I would've been terrified," she admitted after a moment, quivering briefly in fear. "I still think he might've been too young to go. We were really lucky we didn't lose any cats."

It's a little too early to say that... Ravenpaw wanted to say, thinking of poor Russetdawn, still at the edge of life in the medicine cat's den. He he shook the thought away and kept it silent--they didn't know that she was going to die. He had to believe in StarClan that they wouldn't take her away from her kits. After all, they had not mentioned her at the Moonstream, and if she had been dying, surely they would've, at least to Mossrain?

Finally, he answered his sister. "The battle didn't go as planned. I don't think Eagleclaw expected to have him fight, just run orders and updates between the different patrols. Then Russetdawn was attacked, and it all went wrong." He shivered, remembering the first time he saw her wounds, so deep and bloody. He had been sure she was moments from death, but here she was, still holding on, weak but alive. *Have faith,* he told himself.

Willowpaw pressed her cheek against his to get his mind off of it,

and he purred in gratitude, taking in her sweet scent. So much like Snowfern's... "I'll go to the den and send him out," she told him, padding over to the rocky entrance of the cave.

Ravenpaw took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. He had to do this, for his Clan and for Maple. They needed Rainshadow, and this was the only way he knew how to do it.

Question #1: What do you think will happen with Rainshadow?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jaypaw sniffed curiously at a small patch of dock, once again testing Ravenpaw's seemingly never ending patience. The smaller tom stopped, black coat bushed against the chilly air wisping through the trees, almost completely cleared of leaves in late leaf-fall.

"Aren't these herbs?" the white and gray tom asked his brother.

"Its dock, used for soothing scratches," Ravenpaw answered, wanting to get going but not able to be rude to his brother. It was barely past sunhigh, but Ravenpaw didn't know how long it would take to get to Rainshadow, question him, and bring him back. *What if he doesn't even* want *to come back?* a part of his mind questioned, but he managed to shake it away. If he truly cared about his family, the moment he learned Maple was alive he would come to the Clan. Ravenpaw main task was likely going to be convincing him to *stay* there.

"Should we take it? We're out here to collect herbs, aren't we?" Jaypaw looked at his brother, and likely noticed the guilty look in Ravenpaw's gaze. The black medicine cat silently cursed his open nature. Jaypaw raised himself up, eyes wide in disbelief. "You *lied?* I didn't think you had it in you!"

It happens more than you think, Ravenpaw thought, but kept the words inside his head. "I'm not proud of it, but yes, I had to lie." His heart dropped just thinking about it. Yes, he kept the truth about his power, but he had lied straight out to his own sister. Without trust, where would the Clan be? Would she get mad when she found out he lied? Fear crawled over his spine.

"Does Mossrain know the truth?"

Ravenpaw looked at his paws. "Mossrain doesn't even know I came out here. Hopefully, he won't find out until we're back, but it's

likely he'll ask Willowpaw, so he'll think we're getting herbs, too." Shame mixed with fear.

Jaypaw purred, shifting excitedly on his paws. Ravenpaw looked at him in surprise.

"What?" Jaypaw meowed, unable to hide his happiness. "You're finally breaking out of your shell! It's like the old Ravenpaw!" He jumped forward, tail flicking. "So what are we *really* doing?"

Like the old Ravenpaw? Had he really changed that much since he was a kit? He filed the question away for a different time. Now came the hard part. How much should he tell Jaypaw? "I had a vision from StarClan," he began slowly, thinking carefully about his words.

Pride flooded Jaypaw's eyes. "That's amazing! What did they say?" He edged even closer, barely able to stay still, jumping from one paw to the other, tail waving.

"They told me about Maple's father, Rain, and where he was..." Keeping the second part of the name a secret stung his tongue like a lie. "They want him in the Clan, to raise her as a Clan cat."

Jaypaw twirled in a circle. "That's *so* cool!" he gasped as he stopped, eyes bright. "I can't believe they told you and not Mossrain! And now we're going to get him, right? How far is he? Will we be going on a long adventure? Hiding out in the forest at night, traveling so far we can't even see the mountains?" His gaze raised to the tall mountains that surrounded their home.

Ravenpaw couldn't help but purr. "Yes, we're going to get him, but he's right outside the territory. We'll be back before dark, hopefully." A brief flare of disappointment echoed in Jaypaw's eyes. Ravenpaw scoffed and shoved his shoulder playfully with his forehead. "Brighten up! You'll still have quite a story to tell the other apprentices! Now come on, we're losing daylight."

Breaking out of his brief sadness, Jaypaw purred and hurried to catch up to him.

They traveled quickly but quietly through the forest, with Jaypaw leading his brother on the best paths, away from the common hunting places in case they were to run into Maskdapple's patrol. Despite how much Ravenpaw would like to see his mother, who was on the patrol, he knew it might cause problems if they were caught. But they went unseen, slipping past bracken and ferns and stepping over tree roots and vines until they reached where the mountains stood in their way, an impossible barrier. They followed the steep rocky cliff side until the undergrowth broke and they found themselves alongside the Old Thunderpath.

Instead of walking along it, they padded on the small stretch of soft land, with it eventually getting so close they walked with Ravenpaw in front and Jaypaw right behind on his tail. Soon enough, it opened up again and the brothers could walk side by side, their fur brushing. It was their first time so far from home, with unfamiliar smells coming to their scent glands. Despite his earlier excitement, Jaypaw now seemed slightly scared, while Ravenpaw was terrified.

His fur was standing straight up, and his body was low to draw less attention to himself. Jaypaw followed his example, but he followed his brother's lead when the black tom straightened up, straining his eyes.

"I think that's it. Come on." With a flash of bravery, Ravenpaw led his brother onto the Thunderpath. It felt hard under his paws, the rough surface scratching the soft skin. He felt open and exposed, no longer protected by even the slightest bit of undergrowth. It had been different along the grass, because it was long and soft. Now, he felt open, with no rocky wall to one side. Breathing deep, he hurried across the path and dove into the bushes on the other side, relishing in their comfort.

Jaypaw scrambled in after him. "I didn't think it would be this scary," Jaypaw admitted quietly. "What if a dog attacks us?" he said suddenly, fear waving from him. "Or a badger, or a fox?"

"Don't worry, Jaypaw," Ravenpaw whispered, licking his brother's ear. "We're okay. There aren't any dogs out here, and we would smell any animal near us. If something came for us, we could also just climb a tree, right?" He flexed his claws as an example of their

ability to hook into the bark of the trunk, hiding his own terror. Those same thoughts had been plaguing him, but he knew he needed to keep his brother calm. It also seemed to help him as well.

After his brother nodded and calmed his breathing, Ravenpaw led them off into the nearby forest, hoping they could follow their scent trail back. His paws almost instinctively knew what path to follow, despite there actually not being a clear way. Though he did see a paw print in some soft dirt, and sniffed it closely. It almost smelled of... BatClan? Were those the cats who had saved Violetfrost's kits? Had two BatClan warriors given the kits to EchoClan for them to raise?

Pushing the thoughts out of his head, he continued past the print, following the invisible trail engraved in his memory. He passed bush after bush, brushing against ferns and avoiding prickly bramble thorns. Jaypaw followed him silently, setting his paws down soft and careful, ears flicking around to focus on every sound they heard.

Then they pushed into the open, and stared at the cave in front of them. It had seemed small in his dream, but now it seemed to gape open like monstrous jaws. He slowed his approach, and felt a little better as he got closer. It was actually quite small, bigger than the entrance to the medicine cat's den but more than half the size of the leader's den in camp. He swallowed, taking in a deep breath. Many different scents came to him. Mainly blood, death, and cat surrounded his nose. There was a heavy trail of blood leading to a fresh mound of soil, where Ravenpaw instinctively knew Violetfrost's body lay, slowly decomposing. The death scent came from the upturned earth as well, further proving his theory. He followed the dried blood until it disappeared inside the den, where two hard and cold blue eyes glared from the darkness.

"Who are you?" a voice growled from the darkness. "Get away from here!"

Jaypaw slowly backed up, swallowing in fear. But, somehow, Ravenpaw, scared of everything, held his ground.

"A-are you... Rain?" He hoped even the first part of the name would

convince the tom the apprentices were friendly.

It seemed he was correct. The eyes blinked, filling with confusion, and then the tom stepped out. As big as Boulderclaw, the tom stood at a massive height and great build, but he was thin and his gray tabby fur was messy, while the unders of his body, looking like they would usually be white, was now dirty and darkened by dirt. His face was shallow from hunger, and there was a sadness Ravenpaw hadn't noticed in his eyes, heightened by his lowered ears and drooping tail. He looked broken, like a tom who had lost everything. But, after all, he *had* lost everything, as far as he knew. His home, his mate, his kits--all gone.

"How do you know me?" the tom asked, voice hoarse and scared. His eyes flickered around the clearing, almost like he was expecting an attack.

Ravenpaw swallowed, trying to control the encroaching fear that was creeping up his spine. He looked at his brother, feeling bad. But then he forced himself to turn back to Rainshadow. "Could we... talk alone?"

"You mean without him?" Rainshadow looked at Jaypaw.

Ravenpaw looked at his brother apologetically. "Is that alright?"

Jaypaw nodded, letting out a shaky breath. "I guess so, but I don't want to be out here alone..." He lowered his head, embarrassed, then suddenly raised it at a sound in the forest, eyes scared.

"You can go into the den, we'll stay out here," Rainshadow meowed, jerking his head to the cave. "There's... blood...but, it's clean and safe..." his mew was quiet, and he looked down at his paws. "At least, it's safe now..."

Obviously feeling awkward, Jaypaw stumbled over to the den, skipping unsteadily past the large tabby and into the darkness. He shot Ravenpaw a worried look as he disappeared. The black tom felt a strong wanting to follow him, but forced himself to hold back as Rainshadow made a slow way over.

"So? How do you know me?" he repeated, settling down and keeping his voice low so Jaypaw couldn't overhear.

"Violetfrost."

The simple word sent fury flaming in Rainshadow's eyes, and in a swift, lightning-fast movement, he had jumped forward, slamming into Ravenpaw and sending his back onto the ground. Air flooded from Ravenpaw's chest, leaving him breathless and struggling. But there was no point, and he fell still after just a moment. Even though he was thin and starving, Rainshadow was shockingly powerful, muscles rippling under his short coat as his tail lashed around in fury.

"Lies!" he growled. "My mate is dead! There is no way you knew I was here!"

At the loud, tough voice, Jaypaw peeked his head out of the den, looking worried. Instant fear flooded his gaze as he saw his brother, small and weak, pinned under the huge tom. With a yowl of anger, his eyes blazed with sudden fire and he raced across the clearing, claws out.

"Stop!" Ravenpaw cried, not to Rainshadow, but instead to his brother. Instantly, Jaypaw skidded to a stop, surprised. But he instinctively listened to any order given to him. Relieved the danger of his brother acting out was past, he now turned to the angry warrior standing over him, with his long claws curled against his chest and causing a light amount of blood to trickle into his fur, sending sharp pains through his body. He was not used to injury, and the pain was awful for him.

"Tell me!" Rain demanded, his claws scraping against his lightly.

Ravenpaw flinched at the renewed pain but forced himself to ignore it. His plan of keeping Jaypaw out of the know was now gone and decided to hold nothing back. "Violetfrost visited me in StarClan, and told me where to find you!" He kept it simple, but the moment he asked more he would reveal. Jaypaw seemed surprised at the Clan cat name for a supposed loner but wisely kept quiet.

"StarClan?" Rainshadow spat. "What is that?"

Of all the questions he expected to answer, Ravenpaw *never* thought he would have to explain what StarClan was. "Our... our warrior ancestors," he mewed softly. "All Clan cats who have died go to the sky, becoming another star in the night. They visit us in dreams and guide our pawsteps. Didn't... didn't your Clan have StarClan?"

He heard the intake of breath from his brother but didn't even look in his direction. Instead, he stared right at Rainshadow, seeing the shock and confusion in his gaze. His claws retracted, and he stepped away unsteadily, shaking his head. Ravenpaw slowly got to his paws, the pain in his chest a distant feeling.

"When you die in MothClan, you go to Firestar's Forest, a complete copy of our territory where Firestar, our first leader, rules with all the leaders after him over the dead warriors of our Clan." He shook his head again, growling, and his weak tone suddenly turned harsh. "Why would Violet go to you in StarClan? How would she know how to get there?"

He calls her Violet, Ravenpaw thought. When they left their Clan, MothClan, they must've taken rogue names, but Violet restored her original name of Violetfrost in death. "I don't know how she got there, I just know she came to me. She told me how you left your Clan because you were in love but weren't allowed to be, and on the journey, she ended up expecting your kits."

New pain flared in Rain's eyes, and he lowered his head. "I didn't think we'd ever find the other Clans, so I went back to MothClan to get a medicine cat..." He looked up. "And you, you're from the Clans we were looking for?"

He nodded sadly. "My name is Ravenpaw, and that's my brother, Jaypaw. Our home is just up the Old Thunderpath, right past the mountains." He turned his head to look at the towering rocks just behind him.

Rain dropped his head. "I stopped us because I thought we would have to go through the mountains... I didn't even realize the path might've cut through them. If I had been here, I could've saved

her... and our little kits..." His legs trembled.

Ravenpaw let out a slow breath. "Your mate had three kits. One died early on..."

"I don't need to hear how my kits were torn apart by a fox, thank you," Rain growled, long claws curling into the ground.

"Rain," Ravenpaw said softly, waiting for the tom to look him in the eyes, "your two other kits survived the fox attack."

Shock, relief, and countless other emotions swirled in his gaze. "Then... My kits live?"

Ravenpaw flinched, realizing he should've phrased his words better. "Tumble died not long after the attack, for he was too weak." At the flash of anger and sadness, and Ravenpaw quickly added, "but your daughter, Maple, is strong and alive. She's living in our nursery, with one of our queens."

First was another flame of relief, then worry. "But the queen, won't she be angry she is kept longer in the nursery? Maple must be over a moon old by now."

Ravenpaw tilted his head. "Goldenpool has no trouble with it. Her kits are the same age, so she still has almost five moons left in the nursery."

Shock and confusion once again washed Rain's face. "But, what of your kit-watchers? When do they take over?"

It was Ravenpaw's turn to once again be confused. "Kit-watchers?" This new Clan was so weird! Cats could not be in love, queens left the nursery early--it seemed--and what in StarClan's name was a kit-watcher?

"When kits are a moon old and give up their milk, a kit-watcher, a cat too weak to become a warrior, watches over them until they are apprenticed at six moons. You... do not have them?"

Ravenpaw shook his head. "No. Queens stay with their kits until they are six moons and apprenticed to a mentor. Then they return

to their duties."

"Then the kits remember who their mother was? Does that not cause complications?"

"What complications?" Jaypaw finally couldn't stay quiet, and approached to stand next to his brother. "We know our mother, her name is Snowfern, and our father is Boulderclaw. Do you know not know your parents?"

Rain shook his head. "It's forbidden, it causes connections. Connections cause love, and love causes weakness."

Ravenpaw felt his fur bristle slightly. "Love isn't weakness! Our cats, they fight for each other and care for each other. Everyone is family. We stand up against enemies together, hunt together, live together. Clans cannot exist without trust."

"Not our Clan," Rain responded sadly. "We learn early on not to trust anyone but our leader."

Ravenpaw couldn't help but flinch. "Right now, it's the opposite," he admitted. Rain tilted his head as a gesture of confusion, and Ravenpaw explained, "normally, we listen and respect what our leader says, but Acornstar is broken and confused and angry. She lost her mate many seasons ago, and is still very deeply troubled by it."

"That's why she acts like this?" Jaypaw gasped. "She's acting all insane and crazy because she lost her mate ages ago? She tried to exile our own mother!"

Rain snorted in surprise. "Talk like that is treason in MothClan."

"I guess it's treason here too," Ravenpaw replied.

"But I'm guessing you wouldn't be killed for it?"

Ravenpaw shook his head. "No, probably just a punishment like being the only one to clean out dens for a quarter moon, or searching the elders and queens for ticks and fleas. But we only have one elder and one queen right now, so I guess it's not that

bad."

"We don't have elders in our Clan," Rain meowed. "You fight and hunt until you die. Most cats don't live too old anyways. Cats become weak once they get too old, and can't survive our way of life."

"Are they not honored for the time they spent fighting for their Clan?" Jaypaw murmured, eyes wide at all the proceedings.

"It's just duty to spend your life serving your leader, you do not get anything for it." He shook his fur. "I'm sure you have countless questions, but can I please meet my daughter?"

Ravenpaw took in a deep breath through his nose. He had completely forgotten! "I'm sorry, I was so distracted by learning more..." he let his voice trail off.

"I understand," Rain meowed. "I can already see the freedom in your Clan, not just from your words, but all your questions. They are rarely allowed, only for battle and hunting training purposes, or to teach the laws."

"I would really like to learn more in the future," Ravenpaw meowed.

"Would that be possible? Once I have Maple, surely I'll have to leave? I don't know how accepting you are of outsiders, but it is definitely more so than MothClan. Any cats outside our own are attacked and killed the moment we see them, whether they are in our territory or outside it. Even kits..." There was a sad tone in his voice that suggested something bad had happened in the past. Ravenpaw decided to stay away from it, not wanting to hear that story.

"We've taken in cats before, from outside the Clan like your kit or from another Clan, like my own mother. She was originally from BatClan, but joined us, EchoClan, because she fell in love with my father."

"Wait, your Clan is named EchoClan, but yet your leader is Acornstar? Why is it not the same?"

Ravenpaw looked at his brother, but he didn't seem to have an answer. "What do you mean? EchoClan is named after our first leader, Echo."

"It isn't like that in MothClan," Rain responded like the apprentice sounded crazy, for which Ravenpaw thought the same of him. "Whenever a leader takes over, they change the name of the Clan to theirs. Currently, our leader is Mothstar, so the Clan is MothClan, to symbolize that she is the absolute ruler. Before she was Nightstar and NightClan, before he was deemed inadequate."

"Inadequate?" Ravenpaw copied, not completely understanding the word but getting the gist of it. Was Nightstar like Acornstar in some way, estranged in the mind?

"Mothstar decided he was too old to lead correctly, and she wanted a cat to be her deputy, so she killed him at their apprentice ceremony and took an apprentice. It was actually my own apprentice ceremony--the cat was my nestmate, Ryefang, though I suspect not my actual brother. I think I only had a sister, and she was incredibly special, but confused and too worried about her place in the Clan." He let out a sigh. "I wish she had agreed to come with..."

Ravenpaw decided to ignore the part about Rain's sister, despite being curious about her name and her life story. Instead, he meowed, "I don't completely understand. You make it sound like this... *Ryefang* became her deputy. Why couldn't she wait until Nightstar died to take him?"

"Another difference in our Clans, I think. How are your deputies chosen?"

"When a cat becomes leader, they take an experienced warrior who has trained at least one apprentice to help them by giving them guidance and input, and help with organizing patrols. If a deputy dies, they are replaced by another cat chosen by the leader," Jaypaw explained.

Rain nodded. "Our deputy's duties are similar, but picking them is different. When a cat becomes leader, they choose a kit out of the

next litter to be apprenticed and take the chosen kit as deputy. They are trained as a normal warrior, but also to organize patrols, keep everybody in order, find out if cats are being disloyal or treasonous, and everything else a leader should do. If that cat were to die or prove too weak to lead, they are replaced by a new cat from the next litter."

Ravenpaw shivered. "To be trusted with that kind of power so young..." he muttered.

"It's not that far off from you," Jaypaw pointed out playfully.

"Yes, it is," he shot back, not unkindly. "Anyways, I have a question; how often are your litters? You're not allowed to fall in love, so how does your Clan have kits?" A sinking feeling welled up inside of Ravenpaw at a sudden dark thought, and he hoped he was wrong. Sadly, Rain's next words proved him right.

"Arranged mating partners, done by the leader then with input from the deputy once they're old enough to choose correctly. The strongest, most loyal warriors are chosen to mate, then once the kits are a moon old they are taken care of by kit-watchers, cats who failed their warrior assessments for one reason or another." Ravenpaw found it nice of the tom to explain kit-watchers again with a little more detail. Before he could ask something else, Rain meowed, "now my turn for a question: Jaypaw said that our picking of deputy and their early power is similar to you. How do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm a medicine cat apprentice," Ravenpaw explained.

"Another difference?" Rain questioned. At the confused looks both Ravenpaw and Jaypaw gave, Rain was once again forced to explain. "Medicine cats are very low in our standards, just simple healers for when we are sick. There are only a few of them, since most cats want to become warriors. After all, our entire Clan is based off how well you can fight and hunt, so being a medicine cat is seen as weak, unhelpful, disloyal, and everything else bad. It's the only time when weakness is allowed. I'm guessing it is not the same in EchoClan?"

"No, there's normally just two medicine cats--" Ravenpaw began, but was interrupted by the tom.

"I'll ask about it later. For now, I just want to get to my daughter." He stood up, signifying he was ready to get going.

"I can understand that. We can also talk on our way." Standing, Ravenpaw stretched out his back, then winced at the pain in his chest. He quickly tried to lick the blood clean. The wound had already stopped bleeding, but his fur was stained. He managed to clean it swiftly.

"Sorry about that," Rain meowed.

"It's all right," Ravenpaw responded, heading along with Jaypaw at his side, and the old MothClan warrior hurried after them. They followed the small trail they had made through the unclaimed forest, feeling much braver with Rain with them. Ravenpaw knew he was starving and weak, but he was still a very large cat, and a fair fight for anything that might cross their way.

Finally getting the plot going, and I wrote almost all this chapter in one go. I'm excited about where this was going. If you can't tell, this book will be longer than the last one, but hopefully, that isn't too bad.

Question #1: How do you think the Clan will react to Rain?

Question #2: What are your thoughts on MothClan?

Chapter Twenty-Three

The sun continued to sink down the sky as Ravenpaw and Jaypaw led Rain into their territory. Bushes trembled as they past, with the gray tabby sniffing many of the scents that passed his nose. "Reminds me of home," he muttered. "Being in a patrol, prowling a dark forest..." He dropped his head with a sigh. "It was an awful place, but I still enjoyed being apart of the Clan."

"Well, you'll be apart of a real Clan soon," Jaypaw meowed kindly.

"That's if they accept me," Rain responded, gazing at the towering trees with memories flashing in his eyes.

"I can convince Eagleclaw," Ravenpaw said with fake confidence in his voice. He had to believe he could get the deputy to allow him in. If he had to, he would tell her the prophecy. But he didn't want too much pressure on Rain, or constant questions from Clanmates. And what if the prophecy was wrong, or took too long to come true? Rain might be kicked out. No, he had to get into the Clan as a normal cat just wanting the best for his daughter.

"Eagleclaw?" Rain meowed.

"Our deputy, and Acornstar's daughter. She's kind of in control right now, while Acornstar is... you know... unavailable."

Rain nodded in understanding.

Suddenly, Jaypaw paused, ears twitching. He crouched, stalking forward slowly, then suddenly leaped for a small fern bush a head on the path. A mouse squealed and ran for cover in a small hole near the base of a tree. The apprentice slapped his paw down at the hole right as it disappeared, narrowly missing the catch.

"Mouse-dung!" he growled, lashing his tail.

"You were too impatient," Rain meowed. "You should've gone slower and more careful."

"We were already really close to it," Jaypaw answered. "I thought it'd run."

"We were down-wind," Rain answered. "So it couldn't smell us."

Sighing, Jaypaw continued on the path. Ravenpaw followed after him, with Rain bringing up the end. Familiar scents of Clanmates filled Ravenpaw's scent glands, and he saw the rocky pathway not far in front of him, hidden by undergrowth. "We're here. Camp is up those rocks," he explained to the tom behind him.

Painful sadness flared in Rain's blue gaze. "We were so close... If I had kept going, I could've saved Violet and the kits..." Once again, his head dropped, and his muscles went slack. He looked like was about to fall over, with agony waving from his body.

Ravenpaw put a soft tail on his shoulders. "We can wait a little if you want, but the Clan will likely see us soon."

Rain shook his head, and raised himself up, suddenly looking sturdy and strong. His eyes showed no emotion. "In MothClan, we must hide all emotions if we want to survive. I was always one of the best." He walked forward with a smooth step.

"Well, keep some emotion. You have to seem vulnerable, but still strong. If you look like that the Clan might attack," Jaypaw meowed, taking up the lead again.

Rain seemed to understand, and gave a little slink to his shoulder, and allowed a small glaze of sadness in his eyes. Just like Jaypaw had suggested, he had the air of a sad but still powerful cat. He was in a weak state of mind, but not someone to mess with.

"Jaypaw? Ravenpaw? Who in StarClan's name is *that*?" It seemed a little lucky that it was Stonecoat guarding, and not a less understanding cat like Grayblaze.

Stonecoat's leg is still slightly injured, makes sense he's resting it. Grayblaze, always a worker, was likely out in the territory,

despite being injured as well. Well, hopefully he was out, and not waiting to pounce inside the camp.

"This is Rain. He's a friend," Ravenpaw answered, walking up to the gray tom. "Rain, this is Stonecoat, my older brother."

Rain dipped his head. "Nice to meet you," he had a slight tone of depression in his voice, but also some excitement, most likely for his daughter. There was also some worry, but Ravenpaw couldn't tell if it was fake or not.

"How did you meet him?" Stonecoat asked, then his fur began to bristle. "Was he in our territory?"

"No," Ravenpaw meowed quickly. "He was outside of it, looking for his kits. He's Maple's father."

Surprise ran through Stonecoat, and he mindlessly stepped back, allowing the tom's entry into the camp. Nodding his thanks, Ravenpaw led the old MothClan warrior up the final rocky steps. It seems most of the Clan had smelled Rain's strange scent or perhaps heard Stonecoat's first few words, for cats had drawn from dens or from where they were eating and were approaching the camp entrance.

"Why is there a stranger inside our camp?" Silverstrike growled, fur bristling. "Stonecoat!" he yowled. The gray tom flinched slightly, but stepped forward. "Why did you allow him in?"

"He's with me!" Ravenpaw quickly stood up for his brother.

"Oh, well if he's with an *apprentice*, then it's *definitely* safe," he meowed with heavy sarcasm, rolling his head.

"Knock it off! Ravenpaw isn't a normal apprentice, and you know that! You will respect a medicine cat and give him the chance to speak," Maskdapple hissed at him, tone hard.

"Feels like home," Rain muttered under his breath with complete calm, though he was feinting a worried expression.

"Let them explain themselves before you yowl your head off,"

Boulderclaw meowed smoothly, walking over from his spot he had been eating a finch with Snowfern, who was getting to her paws and shaking her short fur. She hurried over, giving Ravenpaw a lick on his ear before looking at Rain. She seemed uncomfortable having to look up at him, and softly drew her son away with her tail. Or at least she tried to, for Ravenpaw ignored the pulling tail, much to the surprise of both him and Snowfern.

"What's going on here?" Eagleclaw jumped from the leader's den, muscles moving smoothly.

"We were just getting to that," Silverstrike said with some exasperation, tail flicking in annoyance. Eagleclaw snorted at him, then looked at Ravenpaw, Jaypaw, and Rain. When Jaypaw looked at him, he found everybody else--almost the entire Clan was in the camp, even the apprentices--were staring at him. He turned his head slightly to the medicine cat's den, where he saw Mossrain watching with interest, while from the nursery across the clearing Goldenpool gazed out, no kits in sight.

"Uh..." His throat was dry, anxiety rushing through him at all the sets of eyes on him, but he forced himself to swallow and begin, though rather unsteadily. "This... This is Rain... He's Maple's father..." He paused to think of what he was going to say, and the Clan murmured together, speaking of the kinship between the tom and the little kit they had rescued. *What are the chances,* their combined voices seemed to say to Ravenpaw, *that this random loner is related to Maple?*

Just breath, Ravenpaw told himself and cleared his throat. Slowly, the Clan quieted and looked at Ravenpaw expectantly. He knew he had to do this right and he forced his voice to be strong. "I found Rain on the Old Thunderpath right outside our territory." The lie stung his tongue like a bee sting, filling his throat. "He told us that his mate had died, but his kits nowhere to be found. He was searching for them. We asked their names, and he said Maple and Tumble.

"We brought him here, so he can be with Maple and take care of her. But..." Now the main lie was over, and he had to convince his suspicious Clanmates to let a stranger into their home as a friend. "I

don't think they could survive on their own. Rain is weak physically after moons alone. He can still hunt and take care of himself, but a young kit as well? It would be moons before she could join him on hunts, and he couldn't leave her alone in a den while he went out hunting, could he? I mean, look what happened to his mate... He left, and she was attacked and killed by a fox. What would happen to a poor kit all on its own? And with leaf-bare coming..."

He felt bad for guilt-tripping his Clanmates, but he could see the sympathy in many of their gazes. Silverstrike, though, kept his eyes hard. "So what are you trying to suggest? We take him in? Try to teach him our ways as a Clan? I doubt he even knows what it means to have friends!"

Rain flinched, real pain and memories filling his eyes. Ravenpaw began to answer for the tom, not wanting to cause him more heartache, but Rain rested a tail on his shoulders. "Let me," he said softly, then faced the many cats before him. "After I found my dear Violet dead, I was lost, and I thought my kits had joined her. But you saved them, tried to help them. I know my poor son was lost, but you kept my daughter alive. You gave her to your queen and planned to raise her as a Clanmate, and I have messed that up. She does not know I'm here, and if you truly wish, I will leave now. I will not lay eyes on my daughter, my only living kin, and leave your home without looking back. If I was allowed to see her, I know I won't be able to leave her side without breaking even more. But I cannot raise her alone, in that dangerous world out there. I may not know your customs or ways of life, but I promise I could learn. If you still do not trust me by the time my daughter is old enough to hunt, I'll take her away from here and raise her out there, and pray to my ancestors for her survival."

His speech brought emotion to even Silverstrike's gaze, and the silver tabby lowered his eyes and said nothing. Many cats murmured condolences to him, while others kept quiet.

"I could never be torn away from my own kits," Boulderclaw murmured, gazing at Ravenpaw with pride, then trailing it to Jaypaw, and he gave his son a nod with a similar loving look. Both apprentices glowed with happiness.

Eagleclaw stepped forward, and the murmuring of cats went quiet as they waited for her judgment. Rain dipped his head to her in respect, then waited for her choice. "I do not have kits myself, nor a mate, so I don't completely understand the pain of losing them," she began, sending a vein of fear through Ravenpaw.

Surely she won't reject him? he thought scaredly.

"But," her single word sent relief through the young tom, "I do know what it's like to lose a father, and that is a pain I don't wish on young Maple. I will allow you to stay and prove yourself. If you can show us you can change to our ways and accept how we live, I will award you with a warrior name, to show your status. For now, you will stay as Rain, and your kit Maple. Snowfern, as you have no apprentice, you will assess his progress and make sure he learns our ways. Report to me with updates."

The white and black she-cat nodded and looked Rain over for a moment. He dipped his head to her, and she gave the smallest incline to acknowledge her acceptance.

"You will sleep in the elders' den, and Dappletail will move to the nursery," Eagleclaw decided.

"Please," Rain waited patiently until she finished, "allow me to sleep with my kit. She is all I have left."

Eagleclaw looked conflicted. "I do not know if I can truly trust you yet, and I don't believe Goldenpool would be comfortable sleeping alone in a den with you."

"Then set a guard!" Desperation cut though is voice, and he quickly shuffled backward, lowering his mew. "Please, I need to be with her..."

Eagleclaw hesitated, watching his expression. Then, finally, she said, "fine, you may sleep in the nursery." She turned to her Clan. "Any cat guarding the moorland entrance during the night will also be in charge of checking in on the nursery, and making sure nothing happens." She turned back to the tom. "Sorry for the mistrust."

He nodded his understanding. "Thank you for the chance. May... May I see her?"

"I'll take him," Ravenpaw said quickly. Eagleclaw nodded and led her cats to the rocks near the medicine cat's den to set up patrols.

"Ravenpaw, come see me when you're done!" Mossrain called from their den, and he nodded, a little scaredly, before leading Rain across the clearing. He saw Goldenpool's tail disappear inside, and was glad he wouldn't have to explain anything yet. They entered soon after her, and Ravenpaw took in the milky scent with relief. He always loved the smell and the warmth that swirled around him, taking him back to simpler days.

"Ravenpaw," Goldenpool greeted him kindly, settling in her nest around the four kits. He approached her, brushing her muzzle with his then sniffing Stormkit, then Maple.

"That's her," he nuzzled the kit's light ginger coat, and she stirred slightly.

"She's beautiful..." Rain whispered, leaning close. Instinctively, Goldenpool hissed a warning, curling tighter around them. Rain drew back, surprised.

"Ravenpaw, why did you have to tell him which kit was her?" Goldenpool asked coldly. "He should know what she looks like."

Ravenpaw swallowed. "I promise, Goldenpool, I'll explain everything. But wait until tonight, where others can't overhear. There are others the truth has to be told to as well."

Suspicion echoed in Goldenpool's eyes. "Is he truly Maple's father?" she growled, locking eyes with the young apprentice.

"Yes, Goldenpool, he is. Maple is his kit, but he has not met her before. It was StarClan who led me to him," he added the last part when she looked angry, and her gaze instantly filled with curiosity and surprise. She withdrew her body from its protective curl, revealing the kits once again.

"You may take her, but I don't trust him near my kits," Goldenpool

said to the apprentice, looking crossly at Rain. The tom dipped his head in understanding.

"Thank you." Leaning down, Ravenpaw gripped Maple in his jaws with soft teeth and brought her to a pile of unused moss. He scratched it out in an attempt to make a nest, but Rain took over and skillfully crafted one rather quickly. Thankful, Ravenpaw lay the small kit down. Rain stepped into the nest and curled against her back. With the cold moss mixing with the warm touch of fur, Maple opened her small, dull yellow eyes.

"Goldenpool?" she murmured tiredly. Ravenpaw couldn't help but look at the golden tabby and noticed the broken look in her gaze. She had been taking care of Maple for such a short time, but obviously already felt the she-kit was one of her own. Pain coursed through his heart. He felt awful for taking the little kit from her but knew it was necessary. It was the will of StarClan.

"No," Rain said softly in answer to the kit. "I'm Rain, your father."

"But... Isn't Oakcloud...?" her mew trailed off, and her eyes filled with a sudden realization. "No, Violet's my mother, not Goldenpool." A new flare of sadness etched the old medicine cat's gold eyes, and she tucked herself tightly around her remaining kits, hiding her face from Ravenpaw. "Violet talked about you..." Maple whispered, still staring at Rain. "She said you'd come back..."

Loss sparkled in the blue gaze. "Your mother was the bravest, smartest, and most beautiful cat I had ever met," Rain muttered back. "I can tell you all about her, if you want."

As Maple mewed a quiet and tired agreement, Ravenpaw forced himself to leave them alone. His paws hesitated, though, on the steps to his den. What did Mossrain want to talk about? Well, Rain, most likely. Would he see through the lie? *It doesn't matter if he does,* Ravenpaw told himself. *You're going to tell him the truth anyway, right?*

Before, right after the Moonstream meeting with Violetfrost, Ravenpaw had been convinced that he shouldn't tell Mossrain, Goldenpool, and Eagleclaw the truth. But it was when he was

included in the talk about voting for the battle that he had realized he couldn't keep it a secret. Mossrain and Goldenpool were medicine cats, and both his mentor. And Eagleclaw... while not in name, she was his leader. Acornstar not being present for Rain being allowed into the Clan was the main focus on that point. He didn't even know if she knew what had happened.

But that was exactly the point. He was treating his mentors and almost-leader like they weren't to be trusted. But he was too young to hold this information alone. They *needed* to know. And he would tell them tonight, in the nursery, once everyone was asleep and unable to overhear.

He stepped inside the darkness of the medicine cat den with no idea what he was going to say. Instantly, Mossrain was approaching him. Blossompaw was alone and sleeping, while Russetdawn was in the same state as always.

"You lied to me!" Mossrain said before Ravenpaw could think of what to say. "At the Moonstream, you didn't just learn Maple's name, did you? You learned of Rain, and where he was?"

"I--" He didn't know what he was going to answer, but Mossrain didn't give him a chance.

"There aren't any herbs over by the edge of the territory next to the Old Thunderpath, nothing we need right now, at least. So how did you find him? Was he actually in our territory? Or did StarClan show him to you?" He suddenly began pacing, tail lashing. "Ravenpaw, you've never lied before, as far as I know, and I haven't lied to you. Or at least, I don't think I have..." He shook his head roughly.

"Mossrain!" Ravenpaw had a desperate tone in his voice, and his mentor swung his head around to look at him. "Yes, I lied, and I'm sorry. I promise I'll explain everything, the completely honest truth. But we need to wait until it's night, and it's private. I'm going to be honest with Eagleclaw, as well, and Rain and I will answer any questions you have. You'll probably have more for him..." he let his mew trail off.

For a few moments, Mossrain looked unconvinced, then he finally meowed. "Okay, I'll trust you. Just... don't lie to me again, okay?"

"Okay," Ravenpaw answered. "I promise, never again."

Nodding, Mossrain hesitated for a moment, then leaned forward and rubbed his chin against Ravenpaw's briefly as a sign of trust and affection. Ravenpaw let out a weak purr. "Let's go through our herbs, shall we? We need to get ready for leaf-bare."

"Okay, Mossrain." Ravenpaw felt relief that things we were going back to normal for the moment, and joyfully joined his mentor at the store as he pulled out piles of herbs, setting a few in front of him. As he began to go through the leaves and berries, Mossrain spoke calmly to pass the time.

"I went to BatClan territory today, while you were sleeping. When I returned to find you gone, it reminded me of when you went to the Moonstream without letting me know. But Willowpaw told me where you'd gone. Did she know the truth?"

"No, she didn't." Feeling sad, Ravenpaw asked, "you went to BatClan to get the herbs, right? From Sandflight?"

"You remember that, do you?" Mossrain gave a soft sigh. "Sadly, that was a lie, purely to the BatClan warriors. They are too proud to take prey from us, but it is the main thing that keeps them alive. That kit they mentioned, the weak one? Her mother died kitting her, and her father just before that. It was a very early kitting, caused by the death of the father. If he hadn't died from starvation, if he had just managed to get the tiniest bit of prey, the mother wouldn't have kitted early, and the kit would still have its parents."

"That's awful..." Ravenpaw murmured, accidentally tearing a leaf in his distracted depression. Sighing, he threw it away to the side, to the pile of old, dying leaves and rotting berries no longer usable. "That poor kit..." It almost reminded him of Rain and Violetfrost. If he hadn't left, would her kits still be okay? Would Maple no longer be siblingless, living without her mother and just her father? *But you can't change the past...*

"They will not be able to live like that forever. One day, something will happen that will change the Clans for good..."

Sorry for the very long gap of no updates, I've been having some trouble with school right now and it's been hard to find time to write.

Question #1: What do you think will happen when Eagleclaw knows the truth? Mossrain? Goldenpool?

Question #2: Mossrain had some dire words for BatClan's future. Do you think they will get stronger, or fail as a Clan?

Chapter Twenty-Four

They waited until the moon was high in the sky to slink from the medicine cat's den into the cold air. The icy stone under his paws stung his pads, and Ravenpaw flinched with every step. Soon, though, they were numb enough that he couldn't feel anything.

"I'll get Eagleclaw," Mossrain meowed, heading for the leader's den. A sudden thought struck Ravenpaw.

"Where's Acornstar?" he asked, a little worried.

"She's in the leader's den as well, sleeping on the stone floor. She hasn't moved much since Eagleclaw told her about Rain. She's very angry about it. It happened while you were sleeping." Ravenpaw nodded in response to the jumbled answer. He had decided to take a few hours to himself before having to explain the truth to the three cats he trusted the most outside his family, and fell asleep curled in his nest. Mossrain had woken him not long ago.

Leaving his mentor to get Eagleclaw, Ravenpaw padded over to the nursery. He spotted the cat on guard and recognized it as Oakcloud. Of course, he would want to be close to Goldenpool tonight, as a stranger was in the den with her. The darkened shape nodded his head to him, brown eyes shadowed in the night. Nodding back, Ravenpaw slipped into the den. Instantly, Goldenpool's head rose to meet him, golden gaze dull. It seems she had been too worried about her new denmate to sleep. Rain, meanwhile, had fallen deeply into unconsciousness, Maple curled at his stomach. His muzzle was stained slightly with blood, and Ravenpaw was glad he had been fed.

"I've been waiting," Goldenpool meowed softly, licking the closest the head of the closest kit to her, which happened to be Heatherkit. She mewled and shifted, but then fell still again.

"Mossrain is getting Eagleclaw, and once they join us we can talk. Rain can talk." With soft paws, he padded over to the sleeping tom. "Rain? Rain, wake up." When the tom didn't stir, he touched his cheek with his nose.

Instantly, Rain was awake, eyes wide with fear and protective nature. His claws flashed, and he slashed his paw out. Ravenpaw flinched, shutting his eyes and waiting for the blow. When it didn't come, he slowly peeled open his eyes to see Rain had stopped himself just in time. "S-sorry," he gasped, retracting his claws and curling his leg back up. "You surprised me."

Goldenpool let out an untrusting hiss, obviously upset he had almost injured Ravenpaw. "It's okay," he said to her, then looked at Rain. "Truly. I understand."

Rain blinked in gratitude, just as Mossrain and Eagleclaw entered the den. They both seemed to sense the tension from Goldenpool, but decided to say nothing. They sat together in the center of the nursery. "Mossrain won't tell me what this is about," the deputy said as she settled.

"Because I don't *know* what it's about!" he said quickly.

"It's about me," Rain meowed.

"Obviously." Goldenpool stood up carefully, avoiding stepping her kits and sniffing each one before joining her friends, nodding to Mossrain before sitting right next to him, then all three looked at Rain and Ravenpaw.

After watching Maple for a few moments, Rain got up from the nest with as much care as Goldenpool had, then settled into a sit next to his kit. Ravenpaw decided to stay next to him, so Rain didn't feel alone, and just in case he had to help explain something.

"I guess I should start from before I was born, tell you about my home. But first, I should tell you my name, my true name. For the last few moons, I have been calling myself Rain, but before that I was Rainshadow, a warrior of MothClan."

Goldenpool stifled a gasp, Mossrain widened his eyes, and Eagleclaw stuttered out a jumbled mess of words. She swallowed, and managed to say, "You mean... there's a *fifth* Clan out there?"

Rain nodded, and Ravenpaw said softly, "it would be better if questions waited for the end of the story, or at least at a break."

Mossrain, it seemed, thought his question was too important to wait. "So you knew, about this new Clan? This is what you were hiding?"

"I only found out today," Ravenpaw couldn't help but explain. "Last time I visited the Moonstream, Maple's mother, Violet, or Violetfrost as she known as in MothClan, told me about Rainshadow, and where to find him." He looked at the tom to allow him to speak. He nodded to Ravenpaw in thanks.

"I already kind of explained to Ravenpaw how the Clan works, but not really how we started. Before we were a Clan, countless moons ago before I was even close to being born, we were just a group of rogues, protecting a territory with no real boundaries, with no real rules to control us. Then a stranger came. He showed us the ways of his home, but throughout many moons it became more of a myth that he came from another Clan. I don't know his name before he became our leader, but after it was Firestar, and he named the Clan FireClan."

Rain paused for a moment, ready for a cat to comment. After a few moments, Eagleclaw said, "I don't remember any warriors with the name 'Fire', especially not one that left."

"Not a warrior," Mossrain meowed softly, his eyes widening in surprise. But Ravenpaw didn't need to wait for his mentor to speak. He already knew.

"Firebreeze."

"Firebreeze?" Rain questioned. "You think this cat was the creator of my Clan?"

"I'll be severely worried if he was," Goldenpool meowed softly.

"He was a medicine cat," Ravenpaw explained softly to Rain. "He fell in love with a she-cat who didn't love him back, so he poisoned her mate, then killed her kits." It was a simple explanation, enough for Rain to understand.

Surprisingly, shockingly, Rain didn't seem phased at all. "Sounds a lot like MothClan."

"You say MothClan, but he named it FireClan?"

"Every time a new leader takes over, it is the law that they rename the Clan after themselves, to show they are the complete ruler and must be listened to. It is a way of showing that whatever might've happened under the last leader, it doesn't matter. When I was born, the leader was Nightstar, leading NightClan."

"Tell them how he died," Ravenpaw prompted softly. Rain nodded in simple understanding.

"I will, but some things need to be explained first." He told them how deputies were chosen, raised from a young kit to a powerful warrior. He explained kit-watchers, how queens left their kits at a moon old, and how it was forbidden for them to know their parents' identities. Goldenpool, the only one with kits, seemed most affected by this new information. He explained the sad life of kit-watchers, how they were beaten down by their Clanmates, allowed only one mistake or they would be killed. He talked about arranged mating pairs, where four or five queens would be chosen by how powerful and skilled they were to give birth near the beginning of the greenleaf season.

"The kits born would be divided between the current kit-watchers, usually about three to four kits to a cat. I had three nestmates, one who was my sister, Leafkit." His voice broke at the name, and memories flashed through his eyes. Even more pain flooded him when he muttered, "Violetfrost was my nestmate as well, but I know she wasn't my sister. Ryefang, I think, was her brother. Three other kits were in the den as well, but they were from a different nest. I only know Leafkit is my sister because she found out who our mother was."

He sounds so broken, Ravenpaw thought during his depressed pause. He looked so down, so depressed. His eyes screamed pain and love that had been hidden away for moons.

"I couldn't tell anyone, I would get in so much trouble. Affection isn't allowed, no matter who for. You can't care for your family, your friends, not even an apprentice or mentor. Some cats, it seems like they really didn't have any emotions, but others, me included, we're just very good at hiding it."

He looked up, eyes glistening.

"You know, cats once started to revolt? It was when I was an apprentice, and cats started meeting, planning, training to overthrow Mothstar. I was even going to join, me and Violetpaw. But then they were discovered, and there was chaos. The Purge of the Impure, it was called in the future. All cats who joined the rebellion were forced to choose a side. Those who regretted their involvement in the rebellion were forced to kill those who did not regret it. Many cats died that day, mostly the ones with an actual heart."

"Killing your own Clanmates..." Eagleclaw whispered. "They sound like monsters..."

"They were," Rain responded. "Mothstar especially. She was... demented, honestly, but I guess the Clan liked that in her. She was an awful cat, a cold-blooded murderer, but she knew how to lead, how to keep cats in line. When she was Nightstar's deputy, she did almost everything for him, for he was getting older and weaker and softer, I guess. It was the day of my apprentice ceremony, and she decided that she really wanted Ryekit as an apprentice, as her own deputy. So... she killed Nightstar during the ceremony, right in front of the Clan. But, because of the laws, because she proved him unable to lead as well as he used to, it was okay. Allowed. She immediately became leader, and took Ryekit as an apprentice. He turned into a monster just like her."

Eagleclaw, Goldenpool, and Mossrain were silent for quite a while, just looking at her paws. Ravenpaw couldn't find anything to say either. He was so grateful for living in EchoClan, and not MothClan.

He couldn't imagine being born there, forced to be a cat he wasn't. There was no question--he would never survive there. If he had been born in MothClan, he would've already been dead.

"You..." Eagleclaw finally managed to say, "you talk of these... laws. Are they like our warrior code? Things to follow, to live by?"

Rain shook his head. "Likely not. They are more things for the leader to remember, most of the time. Rules you must follow, things you must do... ways to punish those who don't listen. Firestar still controlling us, even from his Forest."

"His Forest?" Mossrain questioned. "What's that?"

"Firestar's Forest," Ravenpaw answered for the tom. "It's like their StarClan. But, their ancestors don't visit them, don't care about them. They're more a myth, it seems." He looked at Rain, and the tom nodded to show it was true. "They have medicine cats, but they are low down in the ranks, only for healing those injured. They aren't like us..."

"But Firebreeze started MothClan, or NightClan or whatever," Eagleclaw meowed in confusion. "Wouldn't he put medicine cats high up?" She didn't seem to be asking Rain.

"That doesn't matter," Mossrain whispered, then raised his voice to be heard better. "What matters is that these cats are far away from us, and don't know we're here." He looked up at Rain. "But you knew, didn't you? You were looking for us. How? Why?"

Rain waited a moment before answering, slow and uncertain.

"As warriors, Violetfrost and I continued to get closer, and though we had to pretend we were just Clanmates, faking a tense relationship like everyone else, but we went out many times during the night to 'hunt' where we just sat and talked, and enjoyed each other's company. Eventually, we were in love, and all I wanted was to father her kits. But we couldn't, not unless somehow, someway, we were chosen as a mating pair. But nature has a sense of humor, I guess. Violetfrost was chosen to mate with Sleekleg, who had been a warrior for quite a while before she had even been born. I was

terrified for her, and I didn't want her to be with him. But just a little before that, we had captured a group of four cats, a venturing group. I knew they have had to come from somewhere, so I listened to them for quite a few nights, until I finally heard something useful. They talked about their home, BatClan, and how they regretted trying to find help. They talked about the direction they came from, and that's all I needed. I got Violetfrost and we left. We didn't stop for days, just walking and walking and walking, sleeping for the shortest breaks before continuing on, trying to get as far away as possible. But I found out she was expecting my kits, and I was terrified she would die without a medicine cat. I left her in a cave, telling her to be safe, then got back home as quickly as possible.

"I was sneaking through the territory when I found, somehow, my sister. But she turned me away, hardened by moons without any friends. I had begged her to come with us originally, and I asked her to again, but she refused. She was trying to get me to leave when we were found by a patrol, but she managed to save herself from being titled as a traitor by attacking me, dragging me to where they held all prisoners, an old badger's den with one opening surrounded by thorns and guards. I was trapped there for two moons before my sister realized her mistakes and managed to free me. But she still refused to come with... I raced back to Violet, faster than I ever thought possible, but it was too late. I found her dead in the den, with our kits nowhere in sight. I buried her, and was waiting for death to take me to her when Ravenpaw came, and saved me, brought me to my darling kit..."

He looked back at Maple with broken eyes.

Everybody was silent, watching the tom with sadness and sorrow. They were feeling his grief, the emptiness in his soul.

"Thank you," Eagleclaw finally managed to say. "Thank you for sharing, and giving us a warning of this threat. Hopefully, this enemy will never come here."

Ravenpaw gasped suddenly, and everyone looked at him. Fear flooded every vein of his body. Those simple words were so similar to something he had heard before. *The Clans must be ready...an*

enemy will come and they all must be ready. That's what Echo had told him.

That's what she meant. Not the dogs, not the Twolegs, but MothClan. *MothClan is coming for us...* He noticed everybody still looking at him. He almost told them, but like every time, he hesitated. *Not yet,* he decided. He wouldn't tell them yet.

"Sorry," he apologized quietly to his Clanmates. After a moment, Eagleclaw nodded and looked not at Rain, but instead Goldenpool.

"You haven't said anything yet. What are your thoughts, Goldenpool?" the deputy asked softly.

Goldenpool hesitated before answering, looking at her paws. "You come from such an awful, dark place, where cats killed without a second thought. I want to know..." She raised her head and stared down the tom in front of her. "How many cats have you killed?"

Rain lowered his head, eyes breaking. He sighed, quiet and full of grief. "Five. The first one was when I was an apprentice, just a few moons in. A young rogue had entered our territory, and my mentor made me attack her. She had no idea how to fight, and I hurt her so bad because I knew I had to... I pretended to fall away, trip or something, to let her get away. But Hawkmist, my mentor, he saw what I tried to do. He grabbed her, pinned her to the ground. The fear in her eyes..." He swallowed heavily, then let out a shaky breath. "He made me kill her, to 'harden my heart' he had said. I felt her blood on my paws for moons..."

"And the others? Were you forced to kill every time?" Eagleclaw asked.

Rain slowly shook his head. "Not... exactly. The... the second time I killed was at my apprentice ceremony, during the fighting assessment. I was put against this old rogue, gray around his muzzle, blind in one eye. But he was a fighter, a good one." He rolled his shoulder, and Ravenpaw noticed the light tint of a scar there. "I guess you could say I had no choice of killing him because he didn't give me a choice. Usually, Mothstar will call a halt to the fight once she deemed the cat having fought well enough." His eyes

flashed with sadness at a memory he didn't decide to share. "But I never heard it, the call of the battle ending. Maybe she said it and I didn't hear, I don't know. Blood was just *pounding* in my ears, and I wasn't thinking clearly. I had him backed up against this bramble bush in the clearing, blood washing into one of my eyes because he had scratched right above it. Then I saw an opening, and I went forward and bit his throat." Rain gagged slightly. "His blood... it tasted awful, disgusting. It was warm and... it filled my throat, choked me. But I held on until he collapsed onto the ground, and suddenly I was named Rainshadow."

Eagleclaw and her medicine cats looked horrified, and Ravenpaw couldn't help but shift away from the tom. He noticed, of course, and sunk lower to the ground. But yet, he continued on.

"I was a warrior the third time. Out in the forest with... with my sister." How many times had he simply said 'sister' instead of her actual name? Ravenpaw decided the name hurt him too much, that it caused him more pain then just referring to her as 'sister' and not whatever her warrior name was. "I left her for a moment to hunt a mouse, and when I went back she was being attacked. I thought it was a rogue, but then I realized it was a Clanmate. Nettlepool. I never learned why she attacked, I just know it was awful. There was blood everywhere. Before I knew it, I had Nettlepool pinned, and I killed her. The fourth cat I killed was a Clanmate again. Adderstrike. He was guarding me, when my sister helped me escape. It was my only way out, to kill him. I grabbed him by the back of his neck, twisted and pulled until he fell still."

"And the fifth?" Eagleclaw pushed.

"A few days ago. When I was returning to Violet. I found this tom, a pale tabby. It looked like he had gotten into a fight rather recently, with a bad bite on the back of his neck. The moment he saw me, he attacked. But it was uncoordinated, weak. And even though he was falling out, barely standing, he continued to attack. I tried to leave him, but he was following me. Then... He just begged me to kill him, to put him out of his misery. And... I did." His eyes seemed lost.

The nursery fell into silence, only broken by the light snoring from

Dustkit. Then: "Ravenpaw, the grown-ups need to talk. Please, go back to your den," Eagleclaw ordered him.

Instinctively, he looked at Mossrain. The tom nodded. "Go on, I'll be in soon."

Getting to his paws, Ravenpaw said, "goodnight, Rain. Goodnight, Goldenpool." Then he slowly padded from the den. He felt a little bad for not wishing goodbye to Eagleclaw, but forced it behind him and padded through the moonlit clearing, paws soft over the cold night grass. He slipped into the den, and found himself staring at Blossompaw.

And she looked absolutely terrified.

You might recognize the name "Leafkit" from me mentioning Leafkit's Agony a little before, a Special Edition I would like to write. I didn't say her warrior name because it would spoil her book, also why it's called Leafkit's Agony, and not Leaf(full name)'s Agony. But, an important question for those reading:

Question #1: Would you like to know a little about Leafkit (I.e. her warrior name/future) in this story, or wait for her Special Edition to reveal it, and have some extra surprises in the writing?

Question #2: Was learning about MothClan interesting for you? Or was this chapter a little boring?

Question #3: While focusing on this story, there are two Special Editions I'm enjoying the thought of, that might help me get into writing this story a little more. As I mentioned, one is Leafkit's Agony, while another (I've also mentioned this one) is Acornstar's Misery. I probably wouldn't release them until they were like half-way done or something, but I would like to choose one to focus on more, so I wanted to know--would you be more interested in hearing about Acornstar's life, or Leafkit's? I honestly think both are interesting, and reveal a lot.

Also, this book went a slightly different direction than I planned in the beginning, so I changed the description so it fit better.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"I just woke up!" Blossompaw cried. "I didn't even get the chance to call for someone..." She didn't sound like herself. She seemed weak, terrified.

At first, he didn't understand, but then the smell came to him. Sharp, dark, strong--it overpowered the herbs easily. He slowly turned his gaze to the limp body of Russetdawn, and suddenly found it hard to breathe. His chest started pounding, his head burned, and he quickly jumped up and raced to the nest. He practically slammed into Russetdawn, struggling to put his paws on her chest.

He started pumping like Mossrain had taught him to. He was trying to get her heart going, watching her closely, looking for a movement in her whiskers, but there was only the slight jump every time he pressed down. Gasping for breath, he slowly backed up, slipping slightly on loose moss on the ground. He didn't even bother to look at it as he whipped around and raced from the den.

He skidded on the grass outside, claws digging into the ground as he forced a quick turn and hurried to the nursery. Oakcloud saw him coming. "What's wrong?" he asked, looking worried.

But Ravenpaw ignored him, flashing past and bursting into the nursery. Instantly, all eyes were on him, and the kits were awoken by the sound, crying out in shock. Rain instantly turned to Maple, and Goldenpool to her litter.

"Russetdawn, she's not breathing! I tried to get her heart moving again, but--" he didn't even get to finish. Mossrain thundered from the den, paws thrumming on the ground. Eagleclaw hurried after him, and Ravenpaw followed. The three ran into the medicine cat's den, passing the terrified Blossompaw and going straight to Russetdawn's nest.

She looked so small, so pale, despite her fur still being a bright

ginger-brown. Her eyes, Ravenpaw hadn't realized, were open, staring sightlessly into the den. Quietly, somberly, Mossrain leaned forward and licked her eyelids closed, hiding her dull amber gaze from the world.

"She was so young..." Eagleclaw whispered. "She had so much life ahead of her..." Dropping her head, Eagleclaw whispered, "StarClan, I ask you to guide this cat to your hunting grounds, and take her knowing she gave everything she could to her Clan."

"Her poor kits..." Ravenpaw whispered. "What will they do without her?"

"Hello?"

Ravenpaw turned his head slowly to see Oakcloud at the entrance, obviously worried about the trouble. He didn't know what was wrong, just that something *was* wrong. Then his eyes settled on Russetdawn's still frame.

"Oh, no..." he whispered, eyes filled with grief.

"Please, go get Foxpounce," Eagleclaw meowed softly. After a moment, Oakcloud nodded and retreated, still resonating sadness and shock.

"I'll... I'll get Featherpaw, and her brothers..." Ravenpaw told his mentor, and the tom just dipped his head once as Ravenpaw slipped away on quiet paws. Outside in the clearing, Oakcloud was just going into the warriors' den, and the black apprentice hurried to the apprentices' den. He slipped down the tunnel, fighting to see through the darkness. "Featherpaw! Firepaw! Flamepaw!" he called for each of them, repeating their names a few times.

Slowly, groggily, they began to wake, as did the other apprentices. "What's going on?" Willowpaw asked.

"What do you need? Is something wrong?" Featherpaw murmured.

Firepaw's eyes glowed suddenly. "Russetdawn! Is she okay?"

At that moment, a mournful yowl cut through the air, telling

Ravenpaw Foxpounce had just been informed. Suddenly, the three apprentices were up, awake and scared, ready to leave the den and see what was wrong. Ravenpaw led them out, and saw Foxpounce's tail disappearing into the medicine cat's den. Oakcloud had told him in the clearing, and the handsome brown tabby still stood like a shadow by the entrance of his den. Other warriors were beginning to leave their den, curious about what was going on.

The littermates were rushing past him, and he hurried after, reaching the den just after them. Ravenpaw thought he would be forever haunted by the sound of their mournful yowls swirling into the quiet night air. An owl even answered back from the far forest. Moving forward softly, Ravenpaw pressed against Featherpaw, knowing it was the only comfort he could give her, no matter how small it was. After staring at her mother for a few moments, Featherpaw turned her head and hid it in his neck.

For quite a while, they just stood there, listening to Foxpounce's cries of agony.

"You can't leave me," he whispered, nudging her cold cheek. "Please. I *need* you. I... I can't live without you, my love. You promised me we would be together forever, you said you would never leave. We were going to watch our kits turn into warriors, remember? You even thought of their warrior names, when they were tiny little things, barely a moon old. Flameheart, Featherleaf, and Firethorn, right? That's what you wanted?"

Featherpaw let out a shuddering breath into Ravenpaw's shoulder, and Flamepaw suddenly collapsed, unable to stand anymore. Firepaw tried to go to him, mewling like a young kit, but Flamepaw suddenly growled, scaring him back, before forcing himself to his paws and stumbling away, out of sight, out of the den.

Ravenpaw could hear the cats outside in the clearing, having no idea what was going on, why Flamepaw had stormed away. But then the whispers started, the fearful murmurs with the word "dead" floating around.

"They need you," Mossrain whispered to Eagleclaw. "They need a leader."

Ravenpaw wasn't surprised by the words, but found himself sinking into them. It continued to come to him, constantly repeating: Eagleclaw was supposed to be just a deputy, but yet she was completely their leader in everything but name. She had sent Russetdawn into StarClan, something *Acornstar* should've done. And now she was slowly heading for the entrance of the den to speak to her Clan like a leader. He couldn't help but follow, leaving Featherpaw to quietly pad over to her father and collapse next to him.

Eagleclaw padded to the Rock Pile and jumped up, muscles moving smoothly under her pelt. "Will all cats able to hunt for their Clan come to me for a Clan meeting!" Most cats were already out their dens, though, and only a few extra warriors had to come out of the warmth of their den. Goldenpool did appear from the nursery, sitting right outside the front. Surprisingly, Rain did as well.

"What's happened?" Frostfall, one of Russetdawn's closest friends, looked extremely worried and was casting glances to the medicine cat's den.

Eagleclaw sighed. "R... Russetdawn..." She sighed again, turning her gaze from her paws to her warriors. "Russetdawn has joined StarClan tonight."

Shocked murmurs went through the night air, mutters of grief, hints of good wishes to the dead she-cat. Once they began to quiet, Eagleclaw continued.

"I don't know exactly what happened, but I assume she succumbed to her wounds given to her by the dogs." She turned to Oakcloud, who sat next to the medicine cat's den and close to Ravenpaw. "Please, grab her body so we may sit vigil."

The tom nodded silently and disappeared into the den, brushing against Ravenpaw's fur. The Clan waited in silence until the brown tabby finally appeared dragging the limp body of the poor dead cat. Foxpounce followed close behind, with his kits dragging their paws after him. Featherpaw sat quietly next to Ravenpaw and pressed herself into his side. He moved closer to her, trying to comfort her. She let out a shuddering sigh, and tucked her head under his chin.

He sat there, forcing himself still, as Russetdawn's body was settled in front of the Rock Pile, and Foxpounce nudged her cheek once again like he was just making sure she was truly, truly gone. Then he dropped to his stomach and hid his head in her neck like Featherpaw was doing to Ravenpaw.

"Russetdawn might've had a temper, but she has always worked for her Clan," Eagleclaw meowed softly. "She will be missed by her family, her friends, and the rest of her Clanmates. StarClan, please, take care of her for us." She jumped down from the Rock Pile and settled by the warrior with the plan of staying there for the rest of the night.

Featherpaw pulled away, and Ravenpaw gazed over at her. She looked at him with a dull, broken gaze. "I never thought I'd lose her..." she whispered. "I thought she would always be there for me."

"I'm so sorry," he said quietly to her.

"It's okay..." But it wasn't. It wasn't okay. Ravenpaw had been the one to bring Mossrain to the nursery and left Russetdawn alone. Would they have been able to save her, if they were in there with her?

Sighing, Ravenpaw wrapped his tail over his friend's shoulder and led her over to her mother. He settled down with her, keeping his tail over her back. Mossrain appeared soon, setting some mint leaves down on her body. He cut each leaf slightly with his claw, allowing the strong smell to fill the scent glands of the gathering, mourning cats, and hiding the sharp smell of death.

Though he had not been close to Russetdawn at all, Ravenpaw stayed with his friend for the rest of the night, watching her dull body. Her fur was ruffled once and a while by the cold winds, but none of the living seemed to notice. But then, Ravenpaw saw something. It was past the she-cat's body, behind where Frostfall lay mourning.

It was a StarClan cat, that was easy enough to see. He looked around, but no one else seemed to notice it. But he was awake, wasn't he? Yes, he was sure of that. The StarClan cat had more color

than most cats he had seen, with a pale brownish-red tabby coat. Her amber eyes glowed with something he recognized. It wasn't until the familiar ginger-brown of Russetdawn joined the other cat that he realized who the unknown cat was; Russetdawn's sister, who had died when he was a young kit. He didn't know her name, just remembered Featherpaw mentioning her.

Then, his breath caught in his throat when he noticed something else: the two tiny figures struggling to stand at Russetdawn's ghostly paws. A horrible feeling filled him.

Russetdawn was expecting kits when she died...

Both were toms, one with faintly red but mostly brown tabby fur, and the other very pale ginger.

"They were never supposed to live." It was Russetdawn speaking, her voice cool and soft. "Right after I was injured by the dogs, Fawnshine told me that I wouldn't end up surviving, she just didn't tell me exactly how I would die..." Her voice faltered for a moment, then she cleared it with a shake of her star-littered head. "But she also told me I was expecting kits, and that when I died they would join me in StarClan. Tell Foxpounce, please, that I'm okay. That I was ready for this. But... Don't mention the kits, I don't want him tortured by it." She looked at the little cats, pale eyes glowing with love. "Sandkit and Hornetkit will live happy in StarClan."

Then she nudged the little kits, and the family disappeared. Her sister, obviously Fawnshine, dipped her head to Ravenpaw before fading into nothing.

And even with Featherpaw pressed against his side, Ravenpaw suddenly felt more alone than ever. He turned his eyes to the sky, first watching the Star Streak that glared brightly in the distance, shining down over the Old Twolegplace and CrowClan territory. Then, his yellow gaze turned to a shining star right above his head, two smaller ones right under it. Somehow, he knew which stars those belonged to.

Russetdawn, I'll take care of Featherpaw, I promise. And even if they don't want it, I'll make sure Firepaw and Flamepaw are safe, too.

Sandkit, Hornetkit... I like the names... I'm sorry they didn't get a chance to live, but I trust you, that they'll be happy. And... and when it comes time, I'll tell you when your kits become warriors, so you can watch them from the stars...

Ravenpaw was convinced the biggest of the three stars blinked out momentarily, like Russetdawn was acknowledging his words. Feeling just a little more content, though still saddened by the death of the she-cat and her unborn kits, Ravenpaw rested his head on his paws, and watched the cold body sit empty of soul inside the Clan clearing.

When pale dawn light shone against Russetdawn's dull pelt, Eagleclaw finally stood and gave Russetdawn one final lick on her chilled forehead. The deputy shivered slightly. Then, she said softly, "it is time to bury Russetdawn's body, to solidify her status in StarClan. Frostfall, you were always her closest friend. Would you honor her, and help carry her body to the burial site?"

The she-cat nodded silently.

The deputy looked to Foxpounce. "I assume you wish to help, Foxpounce?"

"He is not strong enough." Mossrain, who had only come out of his den a little while ago, stepped toward his leader. "His back wound is still bothering him."

Eagleclaw nodded in understanding, while Foxpounce just still stared blankly at his mate's body, having not moved since he collapsed by her side the night before. His gaze looked as blank as Russetdawn's had before Mossrain had closed her eyes for the last time.

"I'll do it," Boulderclaw said softly. He had stayed by Foxpounce's side throughout the entire night and now rested his thick tail over his old apprentice's shoulder. "Stay here, do not hurt yourself any further by watching her go under." The ginger tabby looked up at this, looking angry, but Boulderclaw added, "be here for your kits. Do not leave them alone any more than you already have."

With help from Oakcloud, the two warriors got Russetdawn's limp body onto their shoulders and headed silently to the moorland entrance.

"Ravenpaw," Mossrain meowed softly, "come back into the den. You should rest for a while."

The apprentice looked at Featherpaw, still resting against his side. She slowly raised her head, looking at him. "I'm okay," she whispered. "I'm going to go into apprentices' den, to rest." She stood stiffly, forcing herself toward her den, her paws dragging over the ground, tail trailing limply behind her.

Ravenpaw felt his heart aching, seeing her so sad and broken. Mossrain rested his thin tail over his back. "She is sick with grief, but I promise it will heal eventually. It is not easy to lose a parent. Luckily, we both have not been cursed with that yet." Mossrain looked at him curiously. "You seem sad for Featherpaw, but yet I sense, not for Russetdawn. Why is that?"

"I am sad for Russetdawn," Ravenpaw mewed softly to his mentor, still looking after his friend. "But perhaps not as sad as I should be. I saw her, last night after she died. Fawnshine, her sister, had come to bring her to StarClan." He looked around briefly to make sure they were alone, but the rest of the Clan had padded away softly, leaving the two alone. "Russetdawn said she knew she was going to die, but she didn't expect how. But Fawnshine told her *after* she was attacked by the dogs, so I don't understand. She died because of the dogs, so I don't know how she didn't expect that..."

Mossrain was quiet for a moment, taking it all in. "I don't know. I guess it doesn't make much sense."

"Mossrain, did you notice anything when caring for her? About... her stomach?"

He seemed surprised by the question. "I... I don't think so, no. Why? Was something wrong with her in StarClan? Did she mention something?"

"Don't tell anyone, okay? She doesn't want Foxpounce to know."

Ravenpaw watched his mentor, to make sure he understood.

"I can't tell anyone anything that I don't know," Mossrain meowed. "What is it?"

After a small hesitation, and another look around, Ravenpaw explained quietly, "when she died, Russetdawn was expecting kits. They joined her in StarClan. Two little toms, Sandkit and Hornetkit."

For many moments, Mossrain seemed too shocked to speak. Then, finally, he shook his head. "But... I don't understand. This should... Shouldn't this make you *more* upset that StarClan took Russetdawn?"

"I think it's the only reason I'm sad," Ravenpaw explained softly. "I... I don't think I see death the way others do, not even you. I used to, I think, but after Berrywhisker died, and I continued to see her in StarClan--got closer to her, even--I think I've realized that death isn't the end, just a beginning of something new. We'll miss those who leave, but they're still here with us, even if we can't see them all the time."

Question #1: What do you think of this chapter?

Question#2: What do you think of Ravenpaw's short speech about death? Do you agree with it, at least when it comes to the Warriors' series? (both mine and the original from the Erins)

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rowanpaw watched little Hopekit struggle through her nest, fluffy ginger fur still thick with kit fluff. Her eyes, barely even open, glowed the normal kit blue, full of wonder and excitement of life, despite knowing nothing. Emberheart leaned down, licking her daughter's lightly striped head.

"She'll be great, don't you think?" Emberheart's mew was soft and loving.

"Definitely," Rowanpaw answered, as Primkit and Meadowkit went racing past, mewling in excitement as they pounced into their nest, tackling each other, pawing in happiness and fulfillment of life. "She'll be one of the greatest warriors."

"What about me?" Bluekit waddled over, unsteady on her young paws, but growing stronger every day. Breamkit and Bramblekit, her brothers, were tussling softly at Ashbreeze's strong side, her fur smooth and lush, much like Emberheart's glowing frame.

"Well, you'll be one of the best, little kit." Rowanpaw leaned down and nuzzled her kindly. "Go on back to your mother." He nudged her that way.

As she waddled back, Ashbreeze licked her kit's ear before picking her up softly by her scruff and settling her down by her brothers. Instantly, they squealed in excitement and attacked her. "Go easy on her, she's smaller than you."

Another cat entered the small nursery, brown fur glowing. Rowanpaw purred at the sight of her, and her yellow eyes glowed. She likely would've greeted him, except that she had a large, plump mouse in her jaws. She dropped it by his paws, then greeted, "I caught it myself!"

"Good catch!" Rowanpaw purred, unable to stop staring at her eyes. Something felt... wrong. It felt like he hadn't seen her in moons.

"You okay, Rowanpaw?" she asked, tilting her head.

After a moment, he nodded. "Yeah, just feeling a little sad, but I don't know why."

"Alright, feather-brain," she meowed with amusement, then looked around at the queens. "Do any of you need any prey?"

"I just ate a little ago," Ashbreeze answered happily.

"And I shared a sparrow and half a finch with Rainsong," Emberheart meowed, looking at her friend with enjoyment. The queen, currently nursing a tired Flintkit, nodded in agreement.

"Great!" The young she-cat dropped to her stomach with a dramatic sigh. "I've been dying *to get some rest." She pulled the mouse toward her, sniffing at to find the juiciest part.*

But Rowanpaw felt something weird in his chest. "Don't joke like that," he said, a little fiercely.

"What?" The she-cat raised her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Don't joke about things like that. About dying."

Sparkkit looked at him curiously. "Um... Alright."

Then Rowanpaw realized something. "You said you *caught this? How?"*

She looked confused. "Well, I hunted it. Do you think it ran under my paws?"

"But, you're a kit..."

"Hey, rude!" She pushed at his shoulder, then seemed to realize his expression. "Rowanpaw, I'm almost ten moons old. Why wouldn't *I be an apprentice?"*

"But... You're not. You're only five..." Then, a scream cut through his head, along with the sound of a rushing storm. He was still staring at Sparkkit, but all he could see inside his head was her body, falling from the tree then slamming down onto the ground. He could remember the fallen tree, dragging her body into the small cover near its roots that had been pulled free from the ground. He had seen the last breath fade from

her tiny, starving body, her gaze clouding.

Emberheart! *He looked back at his friend, his old mentor, staring into her eyes. They were soft, caring, a little worried. "Rowanpaw, Sparkpaw is a growing she-cat, you shouldn't joke about her being a kit. You're worrying me, little one."*

"You... You shouldn't be here," he whispered, remembering the blood, the way it had pooled at his paws, warming his skin, wetting his fur. He could see the light dying from her beautiful gaze, hear Hopekit crying as she searched for food. Rainsong's soft look as she took the kit to raise her own.

"Rowanpaw, are you okay?" Ashbreeze meowed.

"You... Know my name?" he muttered to the she-cat.

"Of course she does." He looked back at Emberheart. "She's known you since you were born. Now Rowanpaw, why shouldn't I be here? I have to take care of my kit, don't I?"

"But... You died..."

Emberheart's gaze turned weak, full of grief, and blood suddenly began to fill her nest, curling around Hopekit's small frame. It swirled around, a dark pool of terrible memories, leaking out of the breaks in the nest, trailing closer to his paws. "Are you sure it wasn't you that died that day?"

Rowanpaw was suddenly awake, breathing heavy, his chest tight, his head aching. His gaze was blurry, and for a blissful moment, he forgot where he was. Then his senses began to flood back into him, the sharp sap of trees, the sickly thick smell of mud, the sweet scent of bark. He was inside the very tree Sparkkit had died in, where Blazepaw had been attacked as a kit by a fox, only to be saved at the last moment by Emberheart.

Emberheart...

Oh, Emberheart.

The shattered pieces of his heart began to burn, and all he wanted

to do was screech out in pain. He dug his mud-clotted claws into the bark, clenching his teeth until it hurt. Suddenly he forcing himself to remember every detail of Emberheart. The way she always kept her tail out of the mud, even when she was empty of hope and wanted to let it drag through the soil; how her eyes lit up with love and excitement when she spotted Heronclaw; and even how her whiskers twitched with amusement at everything Birchsplash did, from tripping over his paws to suddenly chasing his tail.

Everything was agony, sadness tearing through him. He gazed sightlessly into the pine forest, feeling empty inside. He loved so few, kept only so many close to his heart. And yet, those were the cats that died. He had shut himself off after Sparkkit but opened for Emberheart. And she left him, just as his best friend had. Now, he only had Blazepaw. But how long would that last? How long until StarClan took him, then the rest of his Clan?

One day, I will be alone... Sighing weakly, Rowanpaw watched the forest for a moment longer before forcing himself to his paws. Starvation clawed at his stomach, begging him for prey. But he just padded with his tail limp and his head down, heading slowly for his camp. As he traveled, he scented a few of his Clanmates in the middle of hunting, their smells faint over the stench of his territory, and decided to leave them be. He didn't want to talk, anyway.

Before he knew it, he had arrived at the entrance to his camp. He slowly began to climb up, staring weakly at the small jump he had to make to a small ledge to be able to pull himself up. Bunching his muscles, he leaped. But somehow, despite the jump being so small he had been able to make it since he was a young kit, he missed. His stomach slammed against the rock, front paws scrambling for a hold as his back paws hung, swinging, in midair. Then he fell, struggling in the air for only a moment before hitting the ground with his back.

It hurt, with the quickly-healing wounds on his chest opening from the sudden movement. He growled in anger and in pain, struggling to flip over and get to his paws. *At least the ground is soft,* he thought sardonically, and suddenly wondered if Sparkkit would've survived if she had hit the marsh, and not a tree root.

The dream resurfaced in his mind, and new pain filled him from the inside. Why couldn't that be real? Why couldn't his Clan be strong, like in his dream? Growling, he forced himself back up the jump, and leaped once again, this time managing to make it. He crawled up to the opening in the mountainside, climbing into his camp. Most warriors were out of camp, with only Leafpelt left to guard. No, Bloomcloud was in camp, too, partly hidden in the shadows of the entrance to the small cave of the warriors' den.

She looked very tired, breathing rather heavily. Her sides, ribs obvious under her short coat, moved up and down quickly but evenly. There was a small longing inside him, to tuck himself into her fur like had when he was a young kit when he was scared from a thunderstorm, where Sparkkit would poke his shoulder until he followed her out of the den to the camp entrance to watch the crashing clouds above, jumping when silent white lightning lit up the sky. She had enjoyed it, but he never liked the loud noise.

But she wasn't his mother. He wasn't her kit. Her kits were Frondpaw, Carppaw, and Sparkkit. He and Blazepaw didn't have a mother. Of course, right at that thought, he smelled her. Aspenheart. He looked at the forest behind him, seeing her approaching camp with empty jaws, walking next to Hawktail. Both looked skinny, underfed, and he was glad. Not wanting to see them anymore, he went down the rocks into camp and headed straight for the nursery--the only reason he had returned was to see Primkit, Meadowkit, Fernkit, and Hopekit.

He entered, and immediately noticed the dark, somber mood in the den. His eyes landed on the empty place Emberheart had made her nest. But the bedding had been removed, and now blood stained the stone where it had once lay. Right next to the spot, Rainsong was nursing Flintkit and Hopekit. As always, the two tiny kits were trying to eat, but there was nothing, no milk to suckle. But yet, they continued to try. Rainsong looked weak because of it, so skinny her cheeks were sunken, and her blue eyes were dull and looked like they were bulging from her skinny face. Her ribs stuck out of her silver tabby pelt, with her tail limply laying over the side of the nest. Hopekit and Flintkit did not look much better. They were thin, yet still slightly plump because of their young age.

Across the small den, Ashbreeze was watching with eagle eyes as Bluekit tried to walk around the flat nest's edge. She was weak, and despite being over a moon old, was obviously struggling. Suddenly, she gave a light cough, and quick as a flash, Ashbreeze grabbed her and dragged her back to her chest, covering her daughter with licks. Bluekit was too weak to protest, and allowed it, eyes dull and tired. Breamkit watched with quiet, soft interest, but Bramblekit lay still. Since they had been born, he had always been the weakest, and it was no secret to the Clan he had been close to death for the past few days.

But he had continued to survive, for one reason: Lakeshine the elder had given her tiny share of prey to Ashbreeze to keep her the tom alive. And because she did not get a single chunk of a mouse four days ago, she died the day after, too weak to stay alive through the night. Poor Fernkit had woken early to help Sandflight and found the elder dead. Rowanpaw remembered the stories she told him when he was in the nursery as a kit, but he did not feel all that connected to the elder and did not mourn her death. Instead, he went out hunting, so that no one else died. He has caught a rat, a struggling creature caught in a thorn bush. If it had been free, hunting for itself, he would've never got it.

That had been the first time he did not thank StarClan for the prey. His last catch before that had been the sparrow when he hunted with Hazelfur, Brownear, and Wishpaw, and even then he had silently thanked StarClan. But with the rat, he hadn't. He had mercilessly taken its life and brought it to the nursery to Rainsong.

Suddenly, Rowanpaw realized Primkit was watching him with worry. "Are you okay?" she asked softly, her bright amber eyes, which were so much like her brother's, dull from the hardships of life. He remembered her in his dream, running around joyfully, pouncing on her littermates. He remembered how she acted in the garden in the Old Twolegplace, the game he played with her and her littermates, racing from bush to bush. Would she ever play a game like that again?

"Fine." He didn't recognize his own voice. He didn't speak often anymore, not even to his sister. After all, no one spoke to him. He stayed alone from others, even Hazelfur sometimes. Meadowkit

would stray away when she saw him, obviously deterred by the somber aura around him, and the broken look in his eyes. Fernkit was often too busy to spend time with him, hiding away in Sandflight's den to help the struggling medicine cat. Only Primkit, Blazepaw, Rainsong, and Hazelfur spoke openly with him, and not just small talk when they had too.

But even then, he didn't want them, he wanted Emberheart. He *needed* Emberheart.

"Do you want to play?" She didn't look like she could even manage to run for longer than a few moments, much less play. She didn't even *want* to play, he could see that. She just wanted him. But darkness had frosted over his heart, and his eyes reflected the shadows he felt inside. When his cold gaze locked onto hers, she shrunk lower into her small nest, pressing against Meadowkit's sleeping side.

Sadness attempted to pierce his shattered, frozen heart, but the ice fought it away, leaving him empty and blank. He went over, sniffing the small form of Hopekit. She shivered when his cold nose touched her fur, and mewled in starvation. It was like she wanted him, and only him, to fix it. And he would. He nuzzled her again, and just smelling her sweet kit scent, so much like Emberheart's, he felt the ice inside of him softening just the smallest bit.

"I'll find you something to eat, I promise," he said to the tiny being before pulling back. When he padded from the den, and as the last of her scent faded from his nostrils, the ice reformed, thicker than ever.

Rowanpaw noticed the patrols had returned. Two frogs and a baby sparrow were what the two patrols had to show for their hard work throughout the day. "They were a little too busy to notice us," Duskfang was saying, rolling one of the frogs over with his paw.

Brackenfoot, the leader of the other patrol, meowed, "the mother went out hunting, and left her baby behind. It had no chance."

"It's a pity, really," Leafpelt approached on soft paws. "Didn't even get a chance to get bigger. Imagine if it was an adult. It would have

much more meat on its bones."

"We probably wouldn't have caught it as an adult," Brackenfoot pointed out, and Brownear nodded in agreement, then stood and stretched his legs.

"I'm going to head out, try to hunt a little more. Maybe it's mother has returned." He nodded to the young sparrow, which Rowanpaw realized didn't even really have feathers yet, just a thick fluff over its small, body frame. Barely bigger than a mouse, and likely with less meat. But even still, his weak stomach growled, clawing at his insides, begging for just the tiniest bit of prey. He looked down his brown pelt, almost like he was expecting to be able to see movement. Instead, he just saw his ribs, detailed clearly against his short fur.

"Not yet," Clovertail came up on skinny legs, and they shivered when she stopped. It was obvious she was finding it hard to stand. "Dawnstar is calling a meeting when every cat is in camp."

"Well, everybody's here, so get it started." Brownear impatiently shook out his fur.

"Hickoryclaw is still out with *your* apprentice, so I think not." Clovertail flicked her tail, looking slightly agitated.

"Why do we need them? They aren't *real* Clan cats." He looked at Brackenfoot for support, but the near-black brown tom was quiet, shifting awkwardly on his paws.

"Hickoryclaw and I have become friends recently. He's not that bad," the tom said. Brownear looked betrayed, and growled in anger.

"They're *rogues!* And Wishpaw! She's almost as old as me, yet hasn't made a single catch since she joined the Clan!"

"Hunting is hard right now," Leafpelt meowed to her mate, snorting in frustration at his rude words. "You don't blame the apprentice, you blame the mentor. And besides, Hickoryclaw is only out with her right now because you refuse to."

Brownear looked at his paws, then grumbled, "fine, I'll take her out tomorrow, okay?" With a lash of his tail, he stalked across the clearing and settled heavily, beginning to lick the fur on his shoulder. Sighing, Leafpelt walked over and lay next to him. They didn't say anything, but she began to clean the side of his neck, and he let out a breath of calm, and closed his eyes in contentment. A small purr even began to rumble in his chest.

Rowanpaw sat heavily, clawing the stone ground. He wanted to get back out to hunting, not wait around for a useless meeting. Hopekit and his littermates were slowly starving while his Clanmates wandered around the crowded clearing, not as impatient as him but still wanting to get moving. Every moment counted in their fight against starvation.

Finally, though, Hickoryclaw led Wishpaw into the clearing, and looked around in surprise at the crowd of cats. A few let out murmurs of relief, and Dawnstar rose from where she was settled and headed to the rocks by the camp entrance. "Let all my Clanmates listen to what I need to say," she called lightly.

Rowanpaw looked at Hickoryclaw, expecting to see embarrassment, but he stood tall and walked with a head high. Wishpaw, though, slunk slowly after him. They passed Dawnstar on the rocks and settled with their Clan. Rowanpaw silently slipped through his Clanmates and sat against Blazepaw's side. Feeling his brother's haunches against his sent warmth through his fur. Frondpaw sat on his other side, with Carppaw right next to her. They both looked alarmingly skinny, and Rowanpaw did everything he could to not look at Blazepaw's flank to judge his amount of starvation.

Dawnstar looked around her Clan, waiting for them to settle, then began. "As you all know, I planned to attack EchoClan for a part of their territory before leaf-bare began. As you can also probably tell, leaf-bare will be upon us any day now. Yet, this is the first time I've mentioned the battle in awhile. I have been talking to Clovertail, and we decided that a battle is not a good idea."

Instant murmuring shot up after her speech.

"But it was our only hope!" Frondpaw whispered to her brother,

shifting on her mud-stained paws.

"Please, listen to me," Dawnstar called to her Clanmates, and slowly they quieted, looking at her for an answer. "Surely you all realize that, though we desperately need new territory, we cannot afford a fight? If we fought, we would be injured and weak, and infections happen more often then not in our territory, and Sandflight does not have the herbs to help us once we reach a certain point. And that would be whether we won or lost. I doubt any of you could look me in the eyes and say you're confident about us winning a battle against any of the Clans?"

She looked around at the cats, her eyes almost having a desperate gleam in them. But every cat was silent, not even daring to murmur. They all knew it was hopeless, there was no question.

"So what do you suppose we do?" Duskfang asked finally. He stared at his leader not with anger, but instead with fear. He was scared for his Clan, for his future. He was lost, and he needed guidance. Rowanpaw stared at him and his leader with a blank, broken stare, frost lining the edges of his vision.

Dawnstar lowered her head. "We..." she broke off, looking at Clovertail. The deputy turned her head away. She sighed and started again. "*I* decided, that at the next Gathering, I will ask the other Clans for help."

Shock went through the warriors, and they murmured to themselves.

"We've never had to ask for help before!" Juniperfur whispered.

"We've never had so few warriors before, though," Leafpelt answered.

"Exactly," Dawnstar meowed. "Leafpelt is right. I hate to say it, but BatClan is failing. We have so few warriors, and too many young cats to feed. We *need* help. Even when we find prey, we are now too weak to hunt it. We fail our jumps, or cannot run fast enough. Without the help of another Clan, of stronger cats, BatClan will fall, and we will be no more." She lowered her head once again, and

added, a little more quietly, "I have failed this Clan, I know. But I won't cause the end of it." She looked up, determination shining in her eyes. "We will get stronger, I swear. We have always been proud of ourselves, but for now, we have to settle it down and ask for the other Clans to help us. Then, we will rise again. Our wings will beat better than ever, for *we. Are. BatClan!"*

As she yowled the last words, her inspired Clanmates joined her, even Clovertail, who looked so upset by the idea of begging for help. Duskfang spoke his agreement, too, opening his jaws wide and crying out into the musty air. He heard the weak yowls from the nursery, coming from the throats of queens and kits.

But Rowanpaw was quiet. He sat still, eyes dark, and stared coldly at his Clan, with no emotion in his gaze. His heart was entirely frozen.

Question #1: What do you think will happen with Rowanpaw? Do you think he'll ever get better?

Question #2: What do you think about Dawnstar's decision? Do you think the other Clans will agree to help?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ravenpaw watched the sun slowly fade in the distance, sending streaks of orange through the sky. He took another slow bite from the mouse between his paws, then returned his gaze to above him. He knew, once he retreated to his den to sleep the night away, he would wake the next morning to his Clan preparing for battle.

Mossrain was eating beside him, impatiently tearing the feathers from his sparrow. "I'm not sure we're ready for tomorrow," his mentor admitted, not for the first time. "We have a lot of dried oak, which we use to stop infections. Goldenrod helps heal, and we have--hopefully--enough of that. But we're completely out of comfrey roots and very low on dock. We should go out before it gets too dark and gather some."

Ravenpaw nodded in agreement to his mentor's decision, looking around the clearing. Many cats were settled, eating the prey gathered through the day, while others had retreated to their dens to get away from the cold, rushing wind that bit into Ravenpaw's skin. The apprentices, though all in camp, were nowhere to be seen, likely hiding in their den. Normally, he knew they would be talking, laughing, sharing stories about their day.

But not today.

Today, the camp was quiet. Even the warriors, who normally boasted about surprising catches, or shared about their apprentice's training, were not talking. And everyone knew why.

Foxpounce still lay where his mate's body had rested, staring at the empty spot like she was still there, soon to stand up and rub against him. But she was not, and would never again. Boulderclaw and Frostfall had returned with paws dark with dirt and eyes blank with sadness. The she-cat had disappeared into the warriors' den, but Ravenpaw's poor father, with his bad habit of disappearing when in grief, left camp and hadn't returned.

Ravenpaw watched the forest entrance anxiously, hating that his father was gone. It was quite obvious he was less grieving for Russetdawn and more for Foxpounce, his old apprentice. Of course, he would be sad for the she-cat's life being ended, but it was quite heart-breaking for even Ravenpaw to see the ginger tabby tom so broken.

Ravenpaw remembered when he, Jaypaw, and Foxpounce had found Maple and Tumble in the forest, alone and weak. Foxpounce had been happy, then, but now Ravenpaw wondered if he'd ever be like that again. Was his mind cursed, now, to forever look at the blank spot in the clearing, knowing he would never feel his mate's warmth against his side again?

Not until he joins StarClan, Ravenpaw thought, swallowing. What would the tom do if he knew he could be with her in the stars? He might already be thinking it, but the medicine cat apprentice didn't want to risk it by saying anything. The poor tom would have to fight through his grief alone. Ravenpaw wondered if he would end up taking his anger and depression out on SageClan. *Poor Poppysong,* Ravenpaw thought suddenly. He and Mossrain could prepare for battle, but the she-cat couldn't. What if she was out of dock and comfrey roots like they were? Would her warriors suffer because she wasn't ready? And how would she treat the EchoClan medicine cats after this fight?

"Do you think Poppysong will be angry with us?" Ravenpaw asked his mentor softly, pushing away the light remains of his mouse, his appetite suddenly gone. His stomach was twisting, turning, full of bile that was rising in his throat. He could imagine all the blood that would soak the ground of the moor where the battle took place, the injured cats limping into camp, happy with victory but suffering with pain.

Mossrain took a moment to answer, chewing his sparrow thoughtfully before swallowing with a large gulp. "No, I don't think so. Poppysong is smart enough to know it isn't our choice."

"But we didn't warn her!" Ravenpaw mewled weakly. "We've had time to prepare, but she hasn't! What if one of her warriors die because she runs out of the right herbs?"

Mossrain rested his tail on his apprentice's back. "I know it's hard, but try not to think about it. Poppysong is our friend, but she's still from an enemy Clan. Sometimes, warriors must fight." He didn't sound very happy about it, but forced himself to brighten. "That's enough of that! We should start getting ready! We'll need more comfrey roots and dock, and perhaps some goldenrod, as I mentioned before, since I really don't want to run out. We'll grab goldenrod now, then the other two tomorrow when the warriors are gone. Goldenrod is right down on the moor, so it won't take too long."

His mentor got to his paws, shook out his fur, and began to pad for the moorland entrance. But he paused when he realized Ravenpaw wasn't following. Confused, he went back, sniffing his apprentice's head.

"Are you feel okay?" he asked. "I know it is sad losing Russetdawn and her..." he quieted his voice and continued with," and her kits, but you said you weren't that upset. What happened to those thoughts, of a good future in StarClan?"

"It's not that..." he murmured. "You said SageClan is an enemy, but they're not... At least, they didn't use to be." He couldn't help but look to the very few stars already beginning to shine. "How did we get like this, Echo? Can't you show me more?"

"What? What do you mean by that? Did Echo show you something?" Ravenpaw started; he hadn't noticed he had spoken the last words out loud. He realized the mistake quickly, but didn't know how to correct it.

"I... Um..."

Mossrain looked around, seeing the clearing still littered with warriors. "Come, follow me." He rested his tail on his apprentice's shoulders and led him from his spot in the clearing and out the moorland entrance. They headed down the rocky pathway and onto the soft, cold grass. They continued walking, and Ravenpaw realized they were going to where they buried their dead. Soon enough, the small mounds of dirt were able to be made out. Ravenpaw looked at the most recent mound, large but flattened. He

knew it was Russetdawn, and that her body was hidden underneath, protected from predators. Her death scent still hung in the air.

Mossrain followed his gaze, but continued on. They passed the less recent mounds of Tumble and Berrywhisker, and settled near a rose bush. The strong scent swirled around Ravenpaw's scent glands.

"Has Echo visited you? Shown you a vision, or maybe given you a prophecy?" Mossrain asked. "I know it can be scary sometimes, but it's natural for StarClan to visit medicine cats. You've never really had trouble with it before, but I suspect you're getting overwhelmed, with everything happening in the Clans right now. Is it Rain and MothClan? Because they are far, far away, and they don't know we're here. We're safe from them."

And the moment Mossrain mentioned it, a whole new wave of fear and confusion rushed over him. *The Clans must be ready...an enemy will come and they all must be ready.* He hadn't even been thinking about that, it had slipped from his mind.

"You're wrong," he murmured finally. "About MothClan, about SageClan... Everybody is wrong about everything."

Surprisingly, Mossrain didn't respond immediately. Instead, he was quiet, waiting, thinking, before finally meowing softly, "can you explain how we're all wrong?"

"The stories about how the Clans started, they're wrong. We weren't made by strange loners who didn't know each other. Sage was a kittypet, and Bat a loner. They fell in love, and had kits. Four of them. One was Crow, and another was Echo..." He looked into his mentor's shocked eyes. "And Mossrain, Echo... Echo was *blind*. She couldn't just see into other cat's eyes, that was the *only* way she could see. But that's why. She couldn't see herself, so she saw through the eyes of other cats, and could read their thoughts."

"But... How could you know? Did Echo tell you?"

"She *showed* me," Ravenpaw whispered. "Since Berrywhisker died. She's been showing me the past, slowly, carefully. Sometimes, when I'm dreaming, she visits me and brings me back to the past, and I

see it happen like I'm actually *there.* We were all family, until we split. I don't know how, I'm not even close to figuring it out, but..."

"We were family," Mossrain finished for him. "And family shouldn't fight, right?"

Ravenpaw dropped his head. "I don't know. I just... I feel so bad. Poppysong has no idea..." But a strong relief filled him at the knowledge he had finally shared his last secret. Mossrain knew everything, so he didn't have to hide. Except...

"Ravenpaw, there's really nothing I can say to make you feel better. It's apart of Clan life. But... But you mentioned something about MothClan?"

Ravenpaw sighed, and a new feeling of fear filled him. "When I went to the Star Cave alone, to get rid of my power, Echo told me something. '*The Clans must be ready...an enemy will come and they all must be ready.'* I thought it had been the dogs and the Twolegs, but then in the nursery, Eagleclaw said something that reminded me of it. And I... I just *knew* that it was MothClan. I think Rain's prophecy has something to do with it, though."

"Rain has a prophecy?" Mossrain asked in surprise.

Ravenpaw sighed again, realizing how much he still had to tell his mentor. How had he kept all of this bottled up? It had been a short time he had been cursed with so much knowledge, barely over a moon since he had even become an apprentice, but yet he felt like he was overflowing. But yet, so empty. He knew so many things, but only small parts of them. He just wanted the whole picture, to see everything.

'" *The rain will explain the flames and save the Clans from the approaching darkness,*'" he finally repeated for his mentor. "I know the rain has to be Rain, and that the darkness is MothClan. But... How can he explain fire?"

The simple word sent sparks of realization in both the toms. "FireClan," Mossrain murmured.

Ravenpaw nodded slowly. "FireClan turned into MothClan, and Rain explained what and who they were."

"But they're coming," Mossrain meowed. "MothClan is coming."

"When?"

They looked at each other.

Then they were up and racing over the moorland, past the graves, and toward camp. The cool night air was touching the grass, sending chilly air through Ravenpaw's fur. *How long do we have?* he wondered. *What if MothClan followed right behind Rain? What if they are days from here? And we're busy fighting with ourselves!*

Ravenpaw was struggling for breath by the time they made to the rock pathway into camp, but Mossrain skidded to a stop, and his apprentice followed his lead. "We mustn't freak the Clan. We will talk to Eagleclaw privately."

Eagleclaw, not Acornstar, he thought, trying to get his breathing under control. They waited, gasping, struggling to calm. Eventually, when their hearts were still fast but under control, they went up the rocks, reaching the top just as a strong yet hoarse, "will all cats old enough to hunt for their Clan come to me for a Clan meeting!"

"That's Acornstar!" Mossrain meowed, hurrying up the rocks.

Maskdapple was waiting there for them. "I saw you two running back as fast as the wind would allow. Is everything alright?" Her tail flicked anxiously.

"Just fine!" Mossrain answered his mother, touching her nose with his. "Just racing back to get some exercise! Ravenpaw definitely takes after Snowfern! What's the meeting for? Did something happen while we were gone? Is Acornstar okay?"

Maskdapple, despite the depressive tone around camp, seemed faintly amused by her son. "I don't know. Why don't we head over together?"

"I'll be right after you!" he said excitedly. She padded off, and he

quickly said to Ravenpaw, "say nothing yet. I'm sure we're fine. We can talk to Eagleclaw after the meeting." Then he went after his mother, purring as he sat next to her and Pebblepeak. Shadefur padded over, spoke softly to the medicine cat, then settled. Stonecoat joined them a moment later.

"Ravenpaw!"

He looked over to see Jaypaw settled by the other apprentices. He hurried over and sat, looking at Featherpaw and her siblings. They looked quiet and tired, sitting close together and staring at their paws. "Where's Willowpaw?" he asked, searching for his sister.

"With Blossompaw," Jaypaw answered softly, watching the Clan slowly gather together. Eagleclaw looked anxious, standing at the bottom of the Rock Pile with a lashing tail. Acornstar stood on the top, gazing sightlessly out at the territories in her vision. It was quite obvious the leader hadn't informed the deputy what the meeting was about. "Sometime's wrong with her," Jaypaw added.

Ravenpaw looked at his brother in fear. "Willowpaw? What's wrong with her?"

"No, Blossompaw. She seems... Contained." Jaypaw scratched the ground, looking at Featherpaw, then turned back to his brother and whispered into his ear fluff, "I think it was being there when Russetdawn died, and not being able to do anything."

Ravenpaw nodded, and said under his breath, barely able to be heard, "maybe I can try to talk to her..."

Before Jaypaw could respond to the bad idea, Acornstar yowled to signal all the Clan had gathered. "We're fighting SageClan tomorrow," she began, and was instantly interrupted.

"She should be saying 'you're fighting SageClan tomorrow,'" Silverstrike muttered to Maskdapple. "I doubt she'll set a single *paw* on the battlefield." His mate looked at him crossly and turned away pointedly, pressing closer to Mossrain, who lowered his head in embarrassment. Shadefur pressed against him, nudging his chin up.

"And I think that we need an advantage," Acornstar continued. "This advantage will be more warriors! Brightpaw, Petalpaw, come forward." The two apprentices raised their heads in shock, looking at each other, then at their denmates.

"Wait, wait!" Eagleclaw looked at her mother in shock. "You can't do that! They haven't had their final assessment!"

Acornstar snorted, waving her tail. "They're ready. Eagleclaw, don't you think Petalpaw is ready to become a warrior?" She looked at her daughter with a hard, emotionless expression.

"I have to test him first!" Eagleclaw growled. "His hunting his good, and while his ground fighting is good, too, he needs to work more on his tree fighting."

"And Brightpaw needs to touch up her hunting," Oakcloud added anxiously.

"But both can fight," Acornstar meowed. "So they will both become warriors. Petalpaw, Brightpaw, come on." Looking at each other, the two apprentices slowly padded up, casting glances at their mentors. Oakcloud looked at Eagleclaw, almost like he was begging her to stop it.

But the deputy just lowered her head and backed off. "Good." Acornstar lashed her tail. "I, Acornstar, leader of EchoClan, call upon my warrior ances..." her mew faltered, and she turned her eyes to the stars. Then she looked back at the apprentices and started again. "These cats are ready to fight for their Clan, and I know you both will do everything you can to protect us from any attacks made by SageClan."

But we're attacking them, Ravenpaw thought. He couldn't help but look at the upset faces of Brightpaw and Petalpaw. The ceremony was so broken, and the moment they had been looking forward to for so long was obviously going to haunt them.

"Petalpaw, you shall be called Petaldust. Brightpaw, you will be Brightflower. You will each choose a camp entrance, and guard there for the entire night. Then, you will go and fight for your

Clan!" She yowled the last part, looking around at her Clanmates, expecting them to join in.

But they were quiet, looking around awkwardly. Then, Maskdapple jumped up and raced to her kits. "Congratulations, little ones," she whispered, then raised her voice. "Petaldust! Brightflower! Petaldust! Brightflower!"

Slowly, the Clan joined in, a little hesitantly. "Petaldust! Brightflower!" Jaypaw cried, and after a moment Ravenpaw joined him, voice hoarse.

"Good job," Mossrain said to his little siblings, touching both their noses with his own. Pebblepeak nodded agreement.

"We can finally patrol together!"

"Thanks!" Brightflower squeaked, suddenly seeming very young. But then her eyes turned to Silverstrike. He approached slowly, stretching out his claws.

"I'm proud of you both," he said. "I just wish it was done better."

"Silverstrike!" Maskdapple hissed, fur fluffing.

"You can't tell me it was properly done!" he shot back.

"At least it happened!" The tortoiseshell growled. "The words might've been wrong, but we all know StarClan would accept!"

"Who knows they even except *Acornstar*?" Silverstrike responded coldly.

"Don't speak like that!" Eagleclaw approached on stiff legs. "You will treat your leader with respect!"

Silverstrike lowered his head, bowing rather sarcastically. "Of course, dear Eaglestar."

The she-cat stifled a gasp of shock, while Maskdapple growled at him.

"Eaglestar?" Acornstar approached on slow paws, looking confused and broken. "You see yourself as leader? Is that why you tried to stop my decision?"

"No!" Eagleclaw gasped, looking frantic. "I was telling Silverstrike off! I was trying to defend you!"

Acornstar scoffed. "Of course you were," she meowed scathingly. "Because you *always* defend me, don't you?" She leaned forward, eyes hard. "Why don't you start defending yourself, *Eaglestar?*" Growling deep in her chest, the leader turned and stalked across the clearing, to the camp entrance, and disappeared down the rocks toward the forest.

Eagleclaw stared desperately after her mother, looking like she was breaking inside. "Oh, Acornstar..." she whispered, "where did you go? Why can't you be the mother I remember?"

Watching her sadly, Ravenpaw stood, planning on heading to den, but he noticed something. Stormkit had entered the clearing, the sun lightening her brown tabby coat as she bounced, trying to trap something under her paws. A beetle, he noticed, seeing it scuttle wildly about. Her tail was waving and her golden eyes shined.

Then Goldenpool slipped softly from the nursery, looking around scaredly. But she calmed, letting out a sigh, as she saw her daughter. She was obviously not supposed to be out. "Stormkit! It's time to go back inside!"

The words sent a shudder through Ravenpaw. At first, he didn't understand why, but as the scene continued to play, he realized what was going on.

He had seen this before.

With a huff of disappointment, Stormkit let her beetle scramble away and headed back to her mother, then squeaked and leaped backward as a tiny white flake settled on her small nose, instantly melting. They began to come down fast, small of heavy, and Ravenpaw felt them beginning to slowly chill his coat.

"What is this stuff?" she mewled, watching intently as another flake fluttered down and disappeared when it touched the ground.

Goldenpool walked over smoothly, muscles moving softly under her shining coat. "Snow," she answered gently. "Leaf-bare has started."

My vision, he thought, shivering more from shock than anything. He had never seen a vision come true this way. His first, of Stormkit dying at birth, had of course been stopped. And though Berrywhsiker had died, he had not seen it happen. But this... this was exactly as how he had seen it. The glow in Stormkit's excited eyes, the smooth glint to Goldenpool's fur, even the tiny fluttering snowflake that curled and twisted in the air before landing on Stormkit's nose. It was exactly the same.

Unable to watch them anymore, he rushed to the medicine cat's den in an attempt to leave his problems behind.

We're almost at the end! One more chapter and book two will be finished. At the end of that one, I will announce the third book's name and plot. A little spoiler, the plot for that will be the original plot for this one. It just went a little different so I decided to split what would've been a very long book in half, so this one is now the same length as the first, and the third will hopefully be the same. Also similar to the first one, this book takes place in a very small time span. I mean, Ravenpaw's only seven and a quarter moons old! And Rowanpaw's eight moons! Such young little kits, and such big futures ahead... The third book will (should) have a much bigger span of time in it. Anyway, let's go on the questions!

Question #1: What do you think of the ceremony? Do you think it was wrong, what Acornstar did?

Question #2: How do you think the battle will go?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

As dawn light rose over the Clan territories, glinting off the trees and sending striking rays of orange through the pale branches, EchoClan milled about the clearing, preparing for battle. Despite the grief that had filled them the day before, cats were mingling, speaking quickly and quietly.

Jaypaw glanced anxiously at Willowpaw, swallowing in an attempt to wet his dry throat. She looked nervous as well, casting her tongue over her muzzle, making her whiskers quiver. She caught his eye, and flicked her ears, eyes going soft. It was a weak try to make him feel better, but just having her by his side helped raise his spirits.

"EchoClan!" Eagleclaw leaped onto the Rock Pile, fur freshly brushed and glowing in the new sunlight. "Today, we will battle SageClan. They have disrespected us, and we will show them our strength, that we will not back down. They outnumber us, so I want every able warrior to follow me into the battle, to trust me with making important decisions throughout this fight. We will form a battle line and go in as one. Pebblepeak, is Willowpaw able to join us?"

The gray tabby turned his yellow gaze to his young apprentice and nodded. "I believe so."

Eagleclaw dipped her head in response and looked to Foxpounce. He still, somehow, was crouched where Russetdawn had not lain for a full day. His eyes were emotionless, and he didn't seem to register anything around him. A sharp pain traveled through Jaypaw at the sight of his mentor. He looked so broken, and he wished he could help, but he knew there was nothing he could say.

"Foxpounce, do you think Jaypaw is ready for this battle?" Eagleclaw asked him with a surprisingly soft tone, but he didn't even twitch an ear or flick his tail. He was silent, unmoving, unfulfilled. Eagleclaw dropped her head in defeat but forced it back

up again. "Jaypaw, you will fight in this battle, but your mentor will not be with you."

"I'll watch him," Boulderclaw said instantly, looking at his son with a glint of pride in his eyes.

"Thank you. Willowpaw, Jaypaw, if you must leave the battle for any reason, whether it be injury or you being scared, do it. Do not be afraid of what your Clanmates may think, because going into this battle if proof enough of your courage. Pebblepeak, Boulderclaw, stay close to them, and if they must flee the battle, go with them. They should not be left alone, no matter how the battle is fairing."

"Well, isn't that inspiring," Silverstrike murmured.

Eagleclaw didn't seem to hear him. "Your main priority is to keep them safe."

"You haven't mentioned Featherpaw, Firepaw, and Flamepaw. Are they not joining the battle?" Frostfall asked, tilting her head and perking her ears.

"I think it would be best if they stayed in camp, with Foxpounce," Eagleclaw replied, a little hesitantly.

"What?" Frostfall leaned forward, straining her ears even more.

"Yeah, what?" Flamepaw stood, fur bristling and tail lashing. "We deserve to fight as well! You didn't even ask us!"

Featherpaw looked sadly at her brother, a dull glaze in her eyes. "I don't want to fight," she said softly. "I want to rest."

"I want to stay home, too," Firepaw murmured.

Flamepaw clawed the earth. "Well, I want to fight! Silverstrike, don't you think I should be allowed to?" He looked at his mentor with a dark expression. He wanted to use this fight to get out his anger, that much was obvious. Jaypaw was worried about whoever the grieving tom went against.

"Of course you can come!" Silverstrike cast a challenging at

Eagleclaw, but she just dipped her head, knowing she couldn't refuse.

"We need every able cat. SageClan has more warriors than us, and many of us are still healing from the dogs. Sadly, I don't think one of our best warriors can join us. Grayblaze, you need to stay here." Eagleclaw was obviously expecting the tom to break out in rage.

And that's what he did. Growling deep in his throat, the large gray tom jumped to his paws, yellow eyes flashing in brief pain. His stomach was still wrapped with cobwebs, though they were perfectly clean, just used to keep his wound safe. "I may be injured, but I can still fight!"

"I don't think that's a good idea," Mossrain replied quietly from in front of the medicine cat's den. "The enemy warriors will target you, and that's dangerous for not only you but the Clan. Surely you realize--"

"Oh, shut *up*!" Grayblaze snapped, cutting the young tom off. Mossrain jerked his head back like he had been stung by a flailing paw. "You talk and talk and talk! Can't you be quiet for once?"

"Hey!" Maskdapple leaped to her paws, fur bristling. "Watch your trap, Grayblaze!"

"That kit can't tell me what to do and when to fight! If I think I'm well enough then I'm well enough!" Grayblaze lashed his tail.

"Don't call him a kit!" Silverstrike hissed.

"I'll call him what I want!" Grayblaze turned to face his brother, tail high and holding one paw slightly off the ground. Jaypaw knew he had injured a paw in the battle with the dogs, and wondered if that was the same one.

"Enough!" Eagleclaw yowled, and her Clanmates turned to look at her. Maskdapple looked guilty, lowering her head and flattening her ears, licking her chest for a moment. Silverstrike raised his head proudly, while Grayblaze snorted and lashed his tail, turning his head away. "Grayblaze will fight and can flee if he needs."

"Then we'll need a guard, right?" Pebblepeak asked. "We can't just leave the camp completely empty."

"I guess you're right," Eagleclaw replied. She was obviously planning to continue, but Pebblepeak cut in.

"I can stay and protect the camp." He looked a little anxious.

"You need to be with Willowpaw," Eagleclaw meowed, then added, "is something wrong? You seem antsy."

"Looks like his brother," Thorntail hissed tauntingly. "Perhaps you should've become a medicine cat, too, Pebblepeak."

"I feel sick," Pebblepeak explained, ignoring his younger Clanmate's taunt. "I think I ate a bad mouse. It wouldn't be a good idea to fight like this."

"Weakling," Grayblaze muttered. Pebblepeak lowered his head and said nothing.

"Watch it!" Maskdapple growled, and headed to her son, circling around him. "Are you okay, little bird?"

Grayblaze snorted at the nickname, while Silverstrike moved forward. "Of course he's okay! You're not going to let a grumbling stomach stop you from digging your claws into your enemies, are you?"

"Leave him alone!" Maskdapple growled. "If he doesn't want to fight then he doesn't have to, no matter why!" She watched her mate coldly.

Silverstrike snarled briefly, then turned and stalked away, settling heavily down by himself.

For a moment, Eagleclaw was quiet. Then she asked, "Pebblepeak, are you sure you want to stay?"

He nodded. "I shouldn't fight, I wouldn't be able to do my best."

"I'll watch Willowpaw during the fight," Snowfern said quickly. "I'll

make sure she's safe."

"Of course you will," Eagleclaw meowed kindly, dipping her head to the white and black she-cat. Then she looked back at her Clan, seeming to swell in size. "It is time. My Clan, trust me, believe in me--follow me." Leaping down from the Rock Pile, she walked through her Clanmates, muscles rippling under her pelt, and headed for the moorland entrance. Cats got up, stretched, and followed. Brightflower stumbled slightly, yawning.

She must be tired, Jaypaw thought. She was awake all night with Petaldust, watching the camp for her sleeping Clanmates. He couldn't help but think of the danger as she headed away. She was practically asleep on her paws, and though Petaldust looked like he was in better shape, the tom tortoiseshell also looked quite unsteady.

"Good luck." Ravenpaw padded up to both his siblings, touching their cheeks with his nose. "Be safe." Worry flashed in his eyes, then it changed as he looked past Jaypaw. The fluffy white and gray tom looked over to see Pebblepeak speaking softly with Maskdapple.

Why is he looking at Pebblepeak like that? Surely he doesn't blame him for staying back at camp? That didn't seem like his brother and when he looked closely, Jaypaw saw a hint of suspicion in the yellow gaze. *Does Ravenpaw know something I don't?* For some reason, he didn't like not knowing something his brother didn't. Of course, Ravenpaw would always be ahead of him with his amazing knowledge of healing but holding a secret about Pebblepeak... That seemed odd.

"They'll be back before you know it." Boulderclaw and Snowfern came up side by side.

"You have to be safe, too!" Ravenpaw mewled like a kit, fluffing his fur.

"We will be, my little herb muddler," Snowfern purred, rubbing her cheek against her son's. "Now go on to Mossrain, I'm sure he needs your help getting ready."

Ravenpaw nodded, bid them all goodbye, then hurried across the clearing on small, soft paws.

Jaypaw turned from the two medicine cats and followed his family down the rocky pathway and onto the dewy moorland grass, wet from a cold night. The snow that had fallen last night had melted, and he shivered as he remembered the chilly flakes soaking into his coat. It had been his first time seeing snow, and though it was cool to see, he knew it would lead to long, hungry moons.

"Remember to stay by my side," Boulderclaw said to him softly, brushing his side against his son's. "I'm sure Foxpounce has taught you quite a few battle moves. Stick to what you know. SageClan is small and wiry, quick on their feet. Don't try to outmaneuver them, they'll beat you to it. Use your size, your bulk, your power. Strong hits straight on, and *never* turn your back to your opponent. Keep them in front of you, or they'll jump on your back and down you. If they get on, try to roll over, it'll force them off, but make sure to get up quickly so they don't attack again. If they're fast enough, they'll use the move to get your stomach open and will be ready to get thrown off so they can jump back fast."

Jaypaw nodded quickly. "I'll do my best, Boulderclaw. Snowfern always said my size would help me in battle, back in the nursery." While his three littermates had a similar slim, lithe body shape of their mother, he had the heavy bulk of his father, a powerful chest and broad shoulders with heavy flanks for heaving himself up trees or taking powerful leaps. Willowpaw and Blossompaw both had the perfect bodies to race across open moorland, tackling racing rabbits before they disappeared into their small burrows, much like SageClan cats.

But we don't go underground, he thought, shivering slightly. He remembered when Foxpounce took him into the tunnels that ran from their camp and all across the territories, though the two didn't go past EchoClan's claim. One tunnel even led to the Twolegplace, apparently, but they never used it.

"The tunnels are a secret from the other Clans. We've never found their scents inside the tunnels, for the entrances were hidden long ago, probably before the Clans even truly began," Foxpounce had

told him when they ventured into the dark depths.

"Are you okay?" Boulderclaw asked him, perhaps noticing his earlier shiver.

"Just thinking," he responded, shaking out his coat.

"It's okay to be scared," his father told him. "Too much bravery can get you hurt. Fear holds you back from making a bad decision."

"I'm not scared," he answered, but there was a sinking in his chest he had felt for quite a while, and it was getting heavier every step he took closer to the battlefield. He couldn't help but remember the battle with the dogs. He hadn't seen Russetdawn get attacked, but he had seen Grayblaze get grabbed by his stomach, swung around, and sent flying through the air, crashing into a bed of ferns. He knew something so brutal wouldn't happen in this battle, but the smell of blood still stung his scent glands, and he wasn't looking forward to having it cover his coat and stain the ground.

Boulderclaw ran his tail along his son's back. "Of course not," he murmured. "But still take the advice." He had a knowing tone but didn't say anything else.

All too soon, Eagleclaw slowed to a stop, the stream not too far in front of her. SageClan's open, sloping moor stretched out until far in the distance, where Jaypaw could make out the tops of blurred trees, marking CrowClan's half woodland half moor territory. The deputy turned to her Clan. "We will wait here until we see a patrol, and then we will cross into their territory. If one of their cats run to get help, do not chase them. We are honorable warriors, and we will give them a fair chance of battle."

"We need to instantly attack the patrol!" Grayblaze argued. "Give them payback for what they said. If one of those cowards flee and leave their Clanmates to fight alone that's their problem."

"Grayblaze, Eagleclaw has given an order." Surprisingly, it was Silverstrike speaking. "You listen to your leader."

"Deputy," Eagleclaw responded softly. Silverstrike rolled his eyes,

sighing.

"As I've said before, you're more leader than Acornstar is. And she's not here, is she? So it doesn't matter what I refer to you as. You're giving orders, after all, risking your life while she hides away in her den with plenty of lives to spare."

Eagleclaw opened her mouth to argue, then shut it again, turning away with flattened ears. Quite obviously, she was running out of ways to defend her mother. Jaypaw shifted on his paws, uncomfortable with the stress gathering in his Clan. Nobody knew who to listen to, Acornstar or Eagleclaw. *We're supposed to listen to Acornstar, but Eagleclaw is better at telling us what to do.*

"What's going to happen to us?" he whispered to Boulderclaw.

"What do you mean?" His father leaned in close, whiskers brushing the apprentice's ear.

"With that's happening between Acornstar and Eagleclaw, what will come of us? Surely we can't survive being torn apart like this forever?"

Boulderclaw sighed, quiet as he drew Jaypaw against his side with his tail. "I don't know what will happen, but I know it can't go forever. Eventually, most likely quite soon, something will change our Clan for the better or for the worse. We won't know until it happens."

"Can't we stop it?" he murmured scaredly.

"I don't know," Boulderclaw meowed. "Only StarClan can see the future. You must just be the best warrior you can, and that is all that your Clan should expect from you."

Jaypaw lowered his head, watching his paws silently. He understood what his father was saying, but it still scared him. How could be work hard when he knew his Clan was failing, falling into darkness under bad leadership? *Will Foxpounce even be able to train me?* he wondered. With how his mentor was acting now, Jaypaw wasn't sure he would be able to train properly for some time.

"Can you help train me, since Foxpounce is grieving?" he asked his father quietly.

Boulderclaw looked at him for a moment, eyes soft. "Of course I can. But don't expect special treatment." He purred in amusement, nudging his son playfully. Jaypaw purred back, curling against the other cat's side, then he turned his gaze out to SageClan's moorland, waiting to see a figure appear over one of the far rises.

The sun had risen quite a bit while EchoClan waited, to the point the warriors had settled down, resting in the cold air. Snow had even started to fall, light flakes that fluttered through the air and rested on chilly fur. Jaypaw was tucked into Boulderclaw's side, fur fluffed in an attempt to warm himself. He had eaten when he woke, a small warm mouse caught by the early patrols sent to hunt before the battle, but now his stomach was beginning to twist in hunger.

"I see a patrol!" Silverstrike, who had stayed sitting attentively, got to his paws, watching the figures walking over the grass. Then they began to run, rushing majestically over the dewy grass, faster than Jaypaw had ever seen a cat move.

"Advance!" Eagleclaw called to her Clanmates, quickly getting to her paws. The warriors and apprentices scrambled up and followed her, and Jaypaw found his muscles stiff and his fur cold. He shook himself, trying to get his blood flowing.

As the SageClan cats got closer, Jaypaw saw there was a four, but one suddenly veered off, turned around, running as smoothly as a bird would fly through the sky. "That's the runner," Silverstrike meowed. "They'll be going back to camp to get reinforcements."

No one responded to him, and instead just continued forward, following Eagleclaw across the shallow part of the river that divided the territories. There was a plant growing there, but the warriors smartly avoided it, knowing one of the few times Mossrain showed rage was when his herbs were messed with.

The SageClan cats were almost at them by the time the group made it across the river, and stopped in a group with Eagleclaw at the front, awaiting the arrival of the lithe cats. They skidded to a stop,

eyes shining with anger. The lead cat was a gray tabby tom, and his fur was bristling so much it made him look twice his size.

"What are you doing, Eagleclaw?" the tom growled. His two other Clanmates, a tailless brown she-cat, and a dark ginger tom, both looked uneasy at the great number of warriors before them, slower in speed but greater in size and strength.

"Defending my Clanmates," the deputy responded. "You have disrespected them, and by doing that you have disrespected me. Your Clan's arrogance has spread over your borders, and it is time for it to go back."

"You risk great injury because my Clanmates mocked you," the gray tabby growled, "and yet you call us arrogant? EchoClan cannot see past its own ego!"

"He's just stalling!" Grayblaze hissed. "We should at least take them out now so they can't fight later!"

"Be quiet, Grayblaze!" Eagleclaw growled, looking back at the tom.

"Yeah, quiet Grayblaze!" the dark ginger tom taunted.

Grayblaze growled, fur bristling. He looked ready to leap, claws digging into the ground as he hunched his shoulders, lowering his head but keeping his eyes locked on the other cat's figure.

Eagleclaw didn't seem to know what to say, and instead just hissed at moor cats.

Before the SageClan cats could respond, Jaypaw saw a wave of cats appear over the far ridge of the sloping territory. "Battle line, quickly!" Eagleclaw ordered, and the cats around her rushed forward, standing by her side. Jaypaw found himself next to Willowpaw between his two parents, near the middle right of the line.

Jaypaw recognized the leading cat of the running charge. The small cream and white body was quite obviously Robinstar, with his larger deputy, a black blur, racing beside him. When Jaypaw could see the leader's fierce yellow eyes, Eagleclaw yowled, "*charge!"*

EchoClan surged forward as one, with Grayblaze and Silverstrike throwing themselves instantly at two of the original SageClan patrol. Frostfall quickly whipped around to tackle the she-cat, who was trying to leap onto Silverstrike's back.

The two lines met violently, clashing together with yowls of venom. Jaypaw found himself facing a thick-furred golden tabby who's green eyes flashed with excitement. He was an apprentice as well, older than him but still roughly the same size. He slashed at the tom's face, puffing his fur. The tom avoided it easily, and didn't wait for Jaypaw to ready himself. He launched forward, spitting, his claws trying to catch the EchoClan apprentice's face, but they only brushed against his whiskers as Jaypaw jerked his head back.

Remembering his father's words, Jaypaw continued to slash straight at the other tom. He tried to maneuver past him, leaping to one side then flashing to the other, but the golden tabby only opened his side to attack, and Jaypaw jumped, haunches still burning from the travel over, and barreled into the other apprentice's side. He gripped the tom's skin underneath his thick fur, grabbing his spine fur with his jaws, getting a large mouthful of fur and warm blood.

Hissing, the tom curved his body, digging his small yet very sharp claws into Jaypaw's shoulder. The pain was surprising, but it faded as adrenaline rushed through his head, and he removed his teeth from the tom's spine only to snap at his face. Shocked, the tom brought his head back, retracting his claws as Jaypaw hoped. Removing his own, he slashed at the tom's face, driving him towards Boulderclaw, who was facing off with a thick-furred brown tabby. Noticing his son, Boulderclaw rammed his head into his opponent's chest, knocking him back, then he slashed rather softly at the apprentice's flanks.

As the golden tabby turned in shock, Boulderclaw went back to his fair fight with the other warrior, while Jaypaw pushed from the ground, blood flattening the fur on his shoulder and front leg, and attached himself to the other apprentice's back. Digging in his claws, he grabbed the tom's scruff in his teeth and pulled back, feeling the blood in his mouth and hearing the tom's pained screeches.

After a few moments, his pain and shock was over-ridden, and he dropped down, rolling. To avoid getting trapped, Jaypaw leaped away, but a flare of agony from his shoulder as he landed caused him to stumble. He expected an attack, but it didn't come. He looked up, scared, to see the golden tabby stumbling past his Clanmates to the outwards of the battle, following a fleeing she-cat, who's white fur was stained rather heavily with blood.

My first victory! he thought excitedly, but it quickly faded. His shoulder was aching from the deep claw marks there, and it was getting stronger as his heart calmed from the fight.

Jaypaw looked fearfully for his sister, and saw her facing off against a lithe light gray she-cat with darker patches, looking rather evenly matched against her. She was obviously an apprentice, barely older than the EchoClan two, and was not to highly skilled in any difficult moves. But Willowpaw was hesitating with her blows, seemingly unwilling to cause too much damage. Her moves were skilled and precise, but she did not aim for harmful places.

He started to go towards his sister, wanting to help her, but his way was quickly blocked by a young tom. He had shining short white fur, with the muscles on his shoulders suggesting he was still an apprentice, but learning well and almost a warrior.

"Fresh out of the nursery?" the tom taunted, slashing his claws out so quick Jaypaw couldn't move his head back in time. They caught his nose, though it didn't hurt that bad.

"You wish!" Jaypaw spat back. Fighting down his fear at facing such an older opponent, he recalled his father's move and jumped forward, ramming his head into the tom's chest. He stumbled but was able to recover faster than Jaypaw, for his head ached from the hard hit of the other cat's bony chest.

The enemy apprentice laughed in amusement as he launched forward, a blur of white fur, and did a quick double slash of each paw then skillfully ducked under Jaypaw's unsteady blow. He realized, though the other tom was quite still, it was still slightly blurred. He shook his head, trying to clear his vision, but the other tom took advantage and clawed the skin over Jaypaw's eyes.

He managed a glancing blow on the tom's cheek as he jumped back, but blood was running down his face, obstructing his vision. He lashed blindly, blinking furiously to clear his eyes, but the tom wasn't in front of him anymore. He dove to the side and leaped onto Jaypaw's back, claws digging deep into his gentle skin.

He wasn't used to such pain, and even in the heat of battle it was enough to cause him great agony. But yet he still tried to force himself through the pain, dropping down and rolling. But it was slow, allowing the tom to jump away like he had before. His wounded back hit the ground, and he yowled in pain, unable to hold it in.

But he forgot to get up. He forgot to protect his stomach.

He only remembered when the white tom leaped over him, fur bristling and eyes flashing. He raised his claws to slice down Jaypaw's belly, and the pain that filled him was like nothing he had felt before. But the tom had barely started when the older apprentice was shoved off by a powerful white and gray figure.

"Come on, up! Let's get you out of here." Boulderclaw pulled Jaypaw by his scruff, forcing him to his paws. Pain was flooding every part of his body, and he couldn't help but lean against Boulderclaw's side. His father's fur was wet with blood, but yet strangely comforting.

Two other figures were heading from the battle, too. Willowpaw was fleeing on lighting fast paws, and Snowfern was racing to catch up to the terrified apprentice. *Both outcomes,* Jaypaw thought, mind numb from pain. Willowpaw was scared, and he injured. He saw two more cats leaving, too. Petaldust was struggling to assist Brightflower, who had a terrible wound down her side. Her eyes were drooping, and her tail dragged through the short grass. She looked so tired and weak. *They shouldn't have fought,* he thought, seeing that though he was in better shape, Petaldust was unsteady and blinking furiously to keep his eyes open and mind sharp.

He couldn't help but glance back at the battle. His Clan, with so many warriors having fled, was not fairing well. Somehow, Grayblaze was still going, but he was covered in blood and was

easily in the worst shape of all the fighting warriors, even those fleeing. But he was fighting, fighting two SageClan warriors at once. And after just a few moments of watching, Jaypaw saw them turn tail and run back for home.

Then, swaying, Grayblaze collapsed. Boulderclaw had been watching, too, it seems, for he quickly said, "get over the stream, *now!*" then turned back and thundered to his brother, tail streaming behind him. Jaypaw was still weak, but he managed to stumble the few tail lengths ahead and into the cold water. The shock woke him slightly, and he mewled to ahead of him, where Snowfern had caught Willowpaw and finally slowed her to a stop.

His mother looked instantly at his weak mewling, and after telling Willowpaw something softly, she raced to him. "Oh, my sweet kit, look at the state of you!" She skidded to a stop in front of him, first licking at the blood that was still slightly blurring his vision then to his injured shoulder. "Where's Boulderclaw? Shouldn't he be with you?" she said through her licking.

"Grayblaze collapsed," Jaypaw said, looking behind him across the stream. EchoClan was being driven back, closer and closer to the stream. Boulderclaw was getting close to the water, Grayblaze weak against his shoulder, barely able to walk. "Should we help?"

"No." Snowfern didn't even hesitate. "You need to get back to the medicine cat's den. Can you walk by yourself? Petaldust needs help." She nodded to the approaching tom, who had crossed the river and was struggling to keep his weakening sister up. Nodding, Jaypaw limped over to Willowpaw while his mother hurried back to the two young warriors, her gait uneven because of a back leg that was dripping blood.

She got against Brightflower's other side, helping Petaldust move her. But it wasn't long before Jaypaw saw Eagleclaw, was battling against not only Robinstar and his deputy, but a third warrior as well. Maskdapple was fleeing from the battle, bleeding heavily from her shoulder, and passed Grayblaze and Boulderclaw without offering help. Instead, she limped to Petaldust and took his place, murmuring to both her kits with the soft, soothing tone only a mother could.

Eagleclaw was quickly overpowered by her three attackers, and turned tail and fled. But few warriors were still fighting. "EchoClan, retreat!" she yowled to them. Frostfall quickly escaped from two warriors, while Stonecoat and Shadefur sent one last cat mewling away before following her. Flamepaw raced by Silverstrike's side, both bad off but Silverstrike more so. One ear looked completely ruined from the distance he was at, and he was almost falling over every time he set one front leg on the ground.

"Stick to the forest, mouse-chasers!" a SageClan cat yowled, bloody but victorious.

"Try again another time, fox-breaths!" mocked another, voice carrying faintly to Jaypaw's far ears. "We'll show you again what SageClan is made of!"

The other warriors growled agreement, and soon they were chanting "SageClan! SageClan!" while the defeated EchoClan gathered together on their moorland and limped for their home.

Jaypaw looked at his Clanmates in despair. The blood scent was almost overpowering, and the pain filling the young apprentice from his wounds made him stumble quite a few times. Willowpaw, much less injured than he was, pressed against him. "I hated that," she whispered.

"I did too," he whispered, though he wasn't completely sure. Before the battle, he had been scared. During, he had been filled with excitement and energy, ready to rip through hordes, but as it neared its end--and even after--he wished he had never been told to come. He wished it had never happened. So many cats were injured, struggling along beside him.

Silverstrike, despite the anger in his eyes, was bleeding from many different places, and was beginning to fall behind. Stonecoat and Shadefur, the least injured, tried to help him, but he hissed them away. Jaypaw was almost surprised Grayblaze didn't do the same, but he also didn't seem to be able to. His head was low, and he was almost entirely supported by Boulderclaw and Oakcloud, who was the only cat willing to help. Snowfern had not even looked at Boulderclaw since he returned with his brother, and it worried

Jaypaw, but he knew there was nothing he could do.

"Remember..." Willowpaw's mew was quiet. "Remember when we were kits, and we would pretend to be in a battle? It always seemed so fun, but now that I've been in one, I realize how terrifying it is. I just... I couldn't hurt that other apprentice..."

"It's okay," Jaypaw whispered, still pressed up against her in case he might fall. He almost said he felt the same, but he knew that much wasn't true. He had almost enjoyed hurting others, feeling the power that filled his claws. Though he hated the blood that he spilled, he had loved the feeling of battle. But the wounds that kept him in suffering reminded him he wasn't very good at it yet. "You don't have to hurt others to be a warrior."

Slowly, the EchoClan cats began to head back home, tails low in defeat and leaving heavy trails of blood behind them.

The Clan was quiet for the way home, with Jaypaw dreading the journey up the rocks into camp. As they neared the far-above clearing, Pebblepeak came rushing down the rocks, followed by Mossrain. "You all look awful!" Pebblepeak mewled scaredly. "Wha--what happened? Did we win? Did anybody die?"

"Do we look dead?" Silverstrike growled at his son. Pebblepeak looked downward, seemingly embarrassed.

"No, Pebblepeak, we didn't win," Eagleclaw meowed softly, while Mossrain hurried around them.

"All of you need to get to the medicine cat's den right away," Mossrain said while slipping through the injured cats, going to Shadefur and sniffing him over. "Are you okay?" he asked worriedly.

"I think my only bad wound is my shoulder," Shadefur answered softly.

"Are you sure?" Mossrain continued to check him over, sniffing at his gray fur. Stonecoat looked rather crossed, and stalked forward with a lashing tail.

The Clan slowly began to climb the rocks, with Mossrain helping Shadefur despite him being one of the cats in best shape--probably the least injured of them all, actually. He had few wounds that looked dangerous, but Mossrain's eyes shined with worry and fear. Jaypaw wondered if he knew something about Shadefur that was harmful to him, but he seemed perfectly fine. Embarrassed, even, with flattened ears and guilty eyes.

"I'm fine, honestly, Mossrain," Shadefur meowed.

"I'll check you over right when we get in," Mossrain said. "I'll get that shoulder taken care of."

Maskdapple, one leg soaked with blood from a badly injured shoulder, forced herself faster to get to her son. "Shadefur is young and strong, he can wait a little while. Others are more injured than he is."

"But..." Mossrain trailed off when Maskdapple pointed out Brightflower, supported by Snowfern and Petaldust, who had taken over again for his mother, though he was dragging his paws over the stones. "Okay." Shadefur ran his tail over Mossrain's back at his dejected tone.

"I'll be fine," he meowed, getting up the last few rocky steps and reaching the clearing. Jaypaw followed close behind him, instantly noticing the lone figure sitting by the waterfall, fur getting sprayed lightly by the misty water. Seeing them, Acornstar jumped up and stalked over, a dark look in her eyes and her tail flicking in annoyance.

"Well? Where is the sound of victory? You look like scared rats running from a hunting cat!"

"That's because we are!" Maskdapple snapped. Jaypaw was surprised by her harsh tone, so different from just a few moments ago when she was speaking with Mossrain. She went from a worried, soothing mother to a harsh warrior in a moment. "SageClan destroyed us! We were not ready to fight them! Look at my poor daughter! She's almost dead on her paws because she got no sleep last night, guarding the camp because *you* made her a

warrior when she clearly wasn't ready!" She stalked toward Acornstar with fury in her entire body. "If she dies, *if anyone dies,* you will live to regret this day!"

With a lash of her tail, Maskdapple passed her shocked Clanmates, went to Brightflower's side, and took over Snowfern's place. With Petaldust, she headed for the medicine cat's den. Jaypaw realized he was wrong. She didn't go from a mother to a warrior--she was always a mother, and that's what made her fierce. She was fighting for her family, and Acornstar had risked their lives.

Slowly, the Clan followed the furious tortoiseshell. They passed Acornstar with only a few glances, disappearing into the medicine cat's den. Eagleclaw hesitated in front of her mother for a moment, then turned and followed her Clanmates. Jaypaw limped inside in front of her, the strong herbs flooding his scenes. For once, he was glad for it, because it blocked out the strong blood.

"Jaypaw!" Blossompaw looked over at him from her nest. He headed over, watching Ravenpaw across the den, directing cats to nests while Goldenpool instantly crouched by Grayblaze, who was lowered carefully into one of the nicest nest's.

"Ravenpaw, I need goldenrod and cobwebs now!" the queen called, and the small black apprentice raced to piles of leaves, picked out certain ones, and dropped them by the golden tabby, then he raced quickly to get a pile of shiny white cobwebs.

"So, what happened? Tell me everything!" Blossompaw clawed at the moss, then seemed to see the blood flattening his fur. "Look at all your wounds! Wow, you'll have so many scars! Too bad your fur will probably cover them."

"I don't want any scars," Jaypaw told her, sitting down in a nest next to hers with a grunt of pain. "And they hurt. Really badly."

"You think *that* hurts?" she growled. "Imagine being stuck in a nest! I can barely move without feeling pain throughout my entire back! I'm *sick* of being injured." She once again scratched at the moss with her claws, ears flicking. "I should've been fighting, too." Suddenly, she looked up. "Wait, did we win? We won, right?"

Willowpaw walked up then, looking scared and sad. She sat in a nest near them, but not as close as she could've been.

"No, we didn't," Jaypaw finally admitted, turning his head away to lick at his shoulder, grunting in pain.

Blossompaw growled angrily. "What use are warriors if they can't even *fight*?" she hissed.

"Oh, shut up!" Silverstrike groaned as he dropped himself into a nest, flinching in pain.

"Ravenpaw!" Mossrain called from where he was pressing cobwebs against Brightflower's terribly destroyed side. "Start working on Silverstrike's wounds. Do that leg first, it needs to be taken care of quickly."

Nodding, the small black tom hurried over to the new patient, leaves clamped in his jaws. He started moving quickly, working so confidently that he looked like a new cat. His eyes were focused, completely intent on what he was doing. He was licking the bite marks on Silverstrike's leg while separating leaves with his paws. Jaypaw couldn't stand to watch any longer and looked away to Blossompaw.

"Are you feeling better?" he decided to ask, ignoring the bile that was rising in his throat. Blood mixed with herbs was filling his scent glands, practically choking him.

"No," Blossompaw growled. "I hate being in this nest, and all those herbs are making me feel sick." Her eyes flicked. "I should be out of this nest already! She promised..." The last part was so quiet Jaypaw could barely hear.

"Who promised?" He leaned forward, curious and a little worried. She sounded so small...

"Nobody," she murmured, her gaze flicking to the other side of the den. A few warriors lay in nests, licking their wounds and waiting to be treated. But she wasn't looking at them, but instead an empty spot with the hints of an old nest that had now been removed.

Jaypaw knew who had laid there. That was where Russetdawn's nest had been. Surely Russetdawn hadn't told her something? She was rarely awake.

Jaypaw shook his head, wincing at the pain it caused his wounds. He began to lick his shoulder again, wishing the pain would go away, and as he waited blood began to leak from above his eye. "Let me help," Blossompaw mewed. A little cautious, Jaypaw leaned close to her, and she forced herself to stretch out her neck and begin to run her rough tongue over his fur on his forehead. He winced but tried to ignore the sharp pain.

He saw Ravenpaw casting them a glance, sadness in those large yellow eyes, but then he forced himself back to his work, where he was coating Silverstrike's paw in thick cobwebs, covering a large scratch on his pad.

"Do you remember," Jaypaw meowed softly, "when you convinced Ravenpaw to leave camp with you, as a kit? Willowpaw refused, but Ravenpaw was excited, somehow. Only you could get him to have that shine in his eyes. We didn't get far, just barely down the rock pathway to the forest before Russetdawn saw us."

Blossompaw flinched at the she-cat's name, withdrawing her tongue. Her whiskers twitched, and she stared at her paws.

"That feels like a lifetime ago," she whispered, and her ears flicked suddenly, and she looked up. Not at Jaypaw, but past him, looking around briefly.

"What's wrong?" he asked, perking his ears and trying to hear what she obviously was. But there was nothing, except the noise of their Clanmates cleaning their fur or mewling in slight pain.

"Nothing," she whispered, looking at him with a shining gaze, "nothing at all." She opened her jaws in a quick yawn that didn't seem completely real, and mewed, "I'm tired." And she lay her head down in her nest, closing her eyes. Jaypaw watched her, too surprised to say anything or even move. She was obviously still awake, her paws twitching and her whiskers quivering slightly. But her eyes stayed closed as she struggled to fall asleep.

"Jaypaw, your turn." Mossrain walked over to him, herbs slightly blending his words. "You're too young to leave for too long, and that shoulder wound is very deep." He dropped his herbs and checked out the wound. He licked it softly, pushing the fur away, before beginning to chew up the herbs. Jaypaw didn't know how he could stand the taste or the smell.

After a little while, Mossrain began to cover the broken flesh with the paste using his tongue. At first, it hurt quite badly, and Jaypaw flinched. But the cold, mushy leaves started to soak into his pain and gently wash it away. He sighed in relief, sinking down into his nest. When he finished, Mossrain laid cobwebs over the wound, had Jaypaw rollover, and began working on his stomach.

Without even realizing it, Jaypaw was drifting off into sleep.

"Jaypaw, Jaypaw wake up." He felt a soft paw nudging his side. Slowly, his eyes flickered open. Bright light was shining into the stuffy den, glinting off dusty particles floating in the air.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly, looking up at Blossompaw, who was staring down at him with shining eyes. His stomach was twisted in pain, and his shoulder roared in agony when he barely tried to move it.

"Nothing," she whispered, looking surprised at him. "Are you going to realize yet?"

"Realize what?" he murmured, blinking his eyes a few times. She looked so excited, happier than he had seen in a while. Her tail was flicking through the air, and her front paws shifted on the ground.

It took just a few heartbeats longer for him to realize that Blossompaw was standing.

And thus concludes the second book of Clouded Skies. I hope you enjoyed reading Frost, and will also like Clouded Skies #3 - Silent Stars when it comes out. Here is the synopsis:

"When Blossompaw gets mysteriously healed overnight, the

medicine cats see it as a gift from StarClan, while some others find a darker meaning. And when an EchoClan cat disappears, they must decide whether to send a patrol after their missing Clanmate, forcing the already divided Clan into even more turmoil. Meanwhile, Rowanpaw struggles to deal with his grief, and face the fact that his Clan is slowly dying, and there's nothing he can do to stop it."

Question #1: How do you think Blossompaw was healed?

Question #2: Do you think being healed will change Blossompaw, for better or worse?

Question #3: Who's story do you like more, Ravenpaw or Rowanpaw? (I know there wasn't as much from Rowanpaw in this book, but I'm hoping for more in Silent Stars and especially in the future after that)